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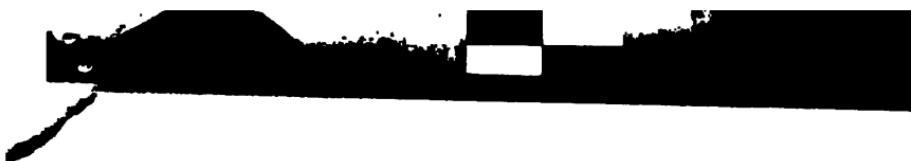
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CAPRICCIOS



CAPRICCIOS



by the Duchess of Leeds

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PAN: A MEMORY



PAN: A MEMORY

I

WE nicknamed him Pan because when we found him that spring morning—a small brown waif lying amongst the long reeds by the river—he was blowing quick childish breaths through a tiny rustic pipe, knitting his baby brows when no sound came, then laughing with wild glee when his puckered red lips drew forth faint, shrill, windlike whisperings.

On his dimpled body he wore nothing but a sheepskin jacket; and his sole possession was the little shepherd's flute through which he was making his first essay at speech.

He could tell us neither whence he came nor what he was called; nothing, except that *il Nonno* had left him there, and that some day *il Nonno* would come for him again.

Weeks, during which we went daily to the riverside wondering why *il Nonno* never came, passed into months, when we still looked for *il Nonno*,

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praying that he would not come. And later, as years flew on, we almost believed that there never had been such a person as *il Nonno*, but that Pan had come to us as the shy violets and starry narcissi and sea-blue anemones come when the winter is over; or as the spring birds wake, when their breasts are warm with song, to make tireless music in the woods.

In the untrodden ways of our Oliveta and pine-woods he thrived sunnily, like any other delicately fashioned, sturdy woodland plant—a child of the sun and of the wind, *honey-pale*, like gracious Bombyca, with soft dark eyes that stole now blue lights from sea or sky, now golden gleams from the sun; and hair, like that of so many Southern children, dark just where it grew thick and close to his head, and auburned, as it were, by the sun, where the outer masses tangled in loose tendrils over his forehead. His small lithe limbs never tired; agile as a squirrel, gay as a bird, he spent his childhood in singing and dancing, a spirit of joy and love to the one or two souls who knew him.

And for us—tired wayfarers seeking to forget in this heaven-beloved Southern land that the world has grown old—Pan's coming gave new life to the

woods. Had spring always starred the cool green terraces with slim narcissi, pure and worshipful acolytes bearing in ardent gold chalices an all-pervading incense? Had the hoary spreading feet of the olive-trees always held thousands of drowsy violets deep hidden amongst the long lush green grasses and dock leaves? As Pan danced hither and thither through sun and shade, under the shimmering grey-green leaves, to our rejuvenated senses his swift bare feet were like the lips of the fairy-tale Prince whose kiss broke the enchanted sleep of Beauty; and where they trod sprang lovely coloured things, golden buttercups, or sweet grape-hyacinths, or scarlet anemones with wild black hearts widening to the sun.

Then the birds! Sometimes, before he came, we used to stand silently under the moonlit trees on warm May nights listening, through the throbbing notes of the nightingale, to eternal sorrow. In the voices of Nature we heard the reiterated echo of our own half-forgotten passions. But Pan with his merry flute changed the note, and sang lustily of joy from sunrise to sunset, with a never-silent chorus of birds ringing changes on the theme. Even when we listened to the nightingale, its

burden of love's sorrow changed into an epithalamium chanting love's rapture, whilst the flickering fireflies came and went through the darkness like little upward-burning flames of love. We had no doubt that it was Pan's doing—Pan and his flute. The eternally young cast off the masque of death, and the spirit of a child, that lived of old time in nature, awoke to laughter and clapping of hands at the sound of this other child's piping.

As for learning, one might as well have chained a linnet to a hornbook! Pan's abnormal stupidity in mastering his 'humanities' was only equalled by his abnormal insight into the hidden meanings of nature and of animal life, as if the preponderance in him of birdlike, flowerlike virtues had narrowed the more human qualities. He would beat the 'ugly, ugly books' vehemently with his small strong fists, deluging them with tears, and declaring wrathfully that he hoped *il Nonno* would come for him soon, very soon. He knew who *il Nonno* was no more than we did. But he did know that he was a ghost to conjure with, and that rather than yield Pan to him we would give up that foolish dream of educating a wild faun to become a man of the world.

But if he could not learn, he could sing. Untaught, save by the birds, whose trills and short impetuous calls and tremulous chatterings he learned to imitate almost before he could talk, he would make music on his little flute that for joy and sweetness was like nothing human. With the dear plaything caressed by his pursed lips, his curly head bent sideways listening to unseen waterways, and to the secret birth-songs of growing things, he would interpret to us the voices of woodland and meadow. Mirth and innocence and primal loveliness ran riot through his music; yet so intangible were the birdlike harmonies, that when one tried to catch and hold them in the memory, they melted into elusive cadences of swift wild laughter running up to the sky; so gay, so enchanting, that, listening, we would often find ourselves laughing too, for no other reason than that the world was in its prime.

So we gave him his flute, and set him to herd our goats, under the olive-trees in winter and spring, and up on the hills in summer, when it became so hot on the lower lands that even Pan felt drowsy, and lost his fresh colours. Air! He could not live without it. It was Pan who first showed us that what we had so often longed for as some

unknown, unattainable good—as love, or sympathy, or health, or pleasure—was in truth nothing else but this: the open air and the light of heaven.

When Pan's instincts led him upward after mountain-clinging breezes we followed him, feeling our limbs more full of spring and youth at every step taken to meet those jocund airs blown straight from the far-off white Alps, whose snow-peaks glittered against the hot sky, cool as white lilies held before a fire. Here, clambering up the tall pines, Pan would shower upon us sweet brown cones, whilst laughter echoed from hill to hill across the valleys. And in sultry noons, when the spreading stone-pines grew heavy with their own silence, and a brooding stillness seemed even here to arrest the life of nature, Pan's flute shrilled sweeter and more piercingly passionate from excess of delight, as if some occult mystery sprang from the very silence, as between lovers whose strongest thoughts are the unspoken.

We taught the boy nothing, beyond that a good Power is over all. And every morning, as the sun rose, Pan would tune his pipe to a hymn in praise of the 'dear delightful God who made the merry world'; but at night he would murmur that he

was too sleepy to play, and the dear God too sleepy to listen, and so would fall into a blithe night-rest unshiven. How should one speak of the religion of redemption and resurrection to a happy soul that knew not of sin or death? And if he never knew of the one, why should the other ever be more to him than a passing sleep, like the winter retreat of the flowers? 'It is asleep till next spring,' he would say, if he came across a dead bird or animal.

The *struggle* of death overcoming life he saw but once. We had gone down to the river (for the greater part of the year merely a pebbly path through the valley, but moving now with lazily running water after the autumn rains). Pan had clambered on to a rock in the middle of a pool, and lay, face downwards, dabbling his fingers in the shallow water. With queer waving movements of his little hands he would lure the swift minnows into his palms, flashing them for one instant into the air, to see how they leapt to silver in the sunlight, and laughing softly at their zigzag darting motions when he threw them gently back into the brown pool. But for a moment, lost in childish delight at the gleaming thing shining like a jewelled sheath in his hand, his quick instinct

forsook him. I saw his eyes widen with fear at the strange convulsive beating of the little gills; then hot tears of terror and anger at the sudden wan stillness rushed down his cheeks.

‘I am afraid,’ he cried, leaping up with a shudder, and staring at the dead minnow. ‘Something has gone away from it . . . I am afraid.’

‘It is only frightened,’ I said : ‘give it to me. I will put it into the deep pool, and if you do not terrify the poor little thing by looking for it again, it will soon be as lively as ever.

But as our little Pagan grew older, conscience, conventional to the last, urged us to lead him out into a Christian world. What would happen to him when the ‘something’ that went away from the minnow went away from us also? We began by taking him, now and again, to the nearest village church, whose delicate grey campanile we could see from our rose-garden, rising like some bell-like flower on the outskirts of the hill over against the blue sea. When there was singing Pan’s voice rang clear and true above the droning gabble of untrained peasants; but, generally, the stuffy atmosphere and dull half-light made him restive, and

plucking at my skirts he would whisper: 'Come away from the funny place and the funny people,' and drag me back into the keen light of heaven.

'What were they doing, all crowded together so still and solemn? and why did they make such strange ugly songs?' he wondered.

'They were praising God,' I answered. 'And He will not love you, Pan, if you are naughty, and will not learn to praise Him in His place of worship.'

'The funny God!' laughed Pan.

We never could make him understand that the God who 'hid in the church,' as he expressed it, was one with his own God, who warmed the earth and spoke in the winds and moved the waves of the sea with an almost visible presence. But he took a child's pleasure in the lit candles, the gold and red vestments of feast-days, and, above all, in the more joyful out-of-door processions. In these, he made up for his delinquencies in church by pouring out his happy little soul in song, until his singing became a feature of the simple, old-world ceremonies.

It was through these innocent means that the world took possession of Pan.

It was the feast-day of the patron saint of our church, when, as usual on this day, a great waxen

image of the saint, arrayed in gold-embroidered vestments, was to be carried in solemn procession from the church on the hill to the little chapel on the seashore, where the holy man had performed his devotions and worked his miracles. Pan, who as far as we could reckon must have been about twelve years old, though he had still the looks and ways of a child, was for the first time to join the children of the choir, whilst we stationed ourselves half way down the hill to see him pass. The saint and his relics were nothing to us ; it was really Pan we were praising in our hearts, the spirit of joy who had brought peace and prosperity to our home.

From where we stood, the crumpled white village, with its tortuous tunnelled ways like the cells of a honeycomb, climbing round the slim campanile, looked like a feudal castle, growth of a bygone chivalry, forgotten there amongst the friendly olive terraces and orange groves. From the little market square the procession wound slowly under the old grey archway down the roughly paved, cypress-bordered path towards the sea.

The sun poured upon the glittering image and the gay banners, on the gorgeously robed,

decorous priest, on the eager, flushed faces of the singing children as they led the way down the hot white path, where groups of peasants bowed their heads and mumbled a prayer when the shining gilt figure of the saint passed by.

Quaintly solemn came the slow Gregorian hymn from the merry mouths of sun-browned peasant-boys, not quite at ease in their newly washed, lace-fringed surplices, lustily chanting the Latin words with shrill, unmelodious voices, and curbing their restless young limbs to solemn paces. Over all, Pan's sweet treble rose in delicious birdlike joy; even the sonorous Latin syllables seemed to grow young between his lips. And as he sang under the blazing sky in honour of the unknown God, some divine enthusiasm fell upon him; and suddenly we saw the well-known child's form darting out in front of the decorous ranks, and heard the clear, shrill tones of Pan's flute soaring high and sweet above the rest of the music, as if the praise within him were too strong to find utterance in any but his accustomed form of speech.

As the merry notes trilled joyfully skywards, his bare feet tripped to the measure in faunlike bounds

and leaps; even the heat-stricken air seemed to quiver with delicate laughter at the revelry of his music. And so he came, a small elfin thing of laughter and music, dancing between the grave black cypresses, at the head of the sedate procession; whilst his swift brown fingers, skimming over the reed pipe, drew forth sounds of love and joy in honour of the anchorite who had won saintship by the denial of these things. To us it seemed that here, once more, we saw the fresh, nature-taught soul of youth paying simple homage to the dear Sun-God.

◆

Later, after the heat and excitement of the day, we took him down to the shore and let him plunge his limbs, redolent of thyme, into the cool sea.

‘In the woods he is the offshoot of some sylvan race—of fauns or dryads,’ I said, as I watched the child, now sporting through the blue, crystal-clear waters, now floating drowsily on his back staring up at the sky, with indolent arms flung over his head. ‘But when he is in the sea he becomes like some wild foam-flower born of a sea-nymph by a water-snake. Every moment I dread to see him ravished from our sight. See! what a distance he has gone!

Pan! Pan! You must come home . . . we are waiting for you.'

'Come and fetch me,' he shouted back; 'I am very happy here. Why should I come?'

'Because we have sweet new honey-cakes for supper, and a bowl of yellow cream, and the first strawberries of the season,' I returned, glad that he was too naughty to be anything but a human child.
'Come back at once.'

This time he obeyed, flinging back the parting water in clouds of filmy mist with his strong little arms as he flashed back to the shore; then, swinging himself on to a great red-brown rock on the edge of the sea, he lent the sweetness of his naked wet body to the freshening evening wind. The full glare of the setting sun swept in a white flood over the wide sea to his feet; and the gentle lapping of ripples against the rock made a monotonously sweet accompaniment to the song that came rushing from his lips—the same processional hymn that he had sung in the morning, but with its stately rhythm broken by roulades of childlike laughter.

He could face light that blinded the rest of us. And as I looked at him standing there—his little

body glowing like yellow ivory in the sun, become, as it were, part of the golden atmosphere, and his arms held out crosswise, like a naked acolyte of the God Apollo—there crept over me a wild fear that he would vanish suddenly, as he had come, and melt into that strong white blaze.

‘Come back ! Come back, Pan !’ I called. ‘We are tired of waiting for you.’

‘I am not coming back,’ he laughed. ‘*Il Nonno* has come for me. Did not you see him at the *Festa, Mamina*?’

‘What do you mean? *Il Nonno*? There is no such person,’ I exclaimed.

‘Well—who knows?’ he answered, twisting himself into his clothes. ‘But there was that stranger watching the procession, and when he put his eye on me so hard, then I said, “Perhaps this is *il Nonno*, though he does not look like what I thought *il Nonno* would look.”’

‘The stranger only looked at you so hard because you were naughty, and played your flute instead of singing with the other boys. He was shocked at you.’

‘Who knows?’ repeated Pan; and played more merrily than ever as we climbed the narrow stony

path, through orange and lemon groves, towards the woods.

But next day he disappeared, as he was fond of doing now and then when the caprice took him; and we saw nothing of him until the evening, when I heard the well-known swift pattering of bare feet running along the pathway between my roses, and Pan came flying to me, his eyes dancing through a luminous haze of tears.

'Dear, dear friend,' he cried, 'I am going away, and I have come to leave you the most precious thing I have in all the world.'

'Going away so lightly and easily?' I said.
'Never to come back again? O Pan!'

'No, no, no. Of course I will come again and live here for ever and ever. But first I must go and learn to be a great singer in the big world; and teach people there all the lovely secrets the woods and hills and birds have told me. That's what he says. And then, when I have learned how to make new songs I shall come home and sing them to you, Mamina . . . and they shall all be about you and the olive-trees and the roses and the blessed sun and—and—'

'Can you live without the woods and the blessed

sun?' I asked, though I knew beforehand that no words of mine could keep him now. 'Will you be happy in the big world of cities?'

'Happy? Why, yes. Why should I not be happy? And yet—' his voice faltered—'I am sorry. Isn't it odd to be sorry?'

He flung back his head, laughing merrily at the new strangeness of being sorry.

'I am to work very, very hard,' he went on. 'They say my music is not real music—only bird-music; and that my flute is not a real flute—only like the toys children play with out there in the cities. But the stranger—the kind man with a nose like an eagle's beak, and the strong, hard eyes—will give me a beautiful new flute of ebony with silver stops, whilst you are taking care of the old one till I come back again.'

'The old one was good enough for us, Pan.'

'Oh yes. And it will still be good enough when I come back. And you will take great care of it, won't you, Mamina? and look at it every day, and touch it, and speak to it of me? When you think of me, you will take it in your hand and be very gentle with it—and merry, thinking of me. Dear little flute! Dear, dear little flute!'

He held it against his cheek for a moment, then passed it softly and lingeringly across his lips. Something like a sigh rose to his breast, but could not force its way through the happy expectation of the coming days. The vision of this new life held him like an enchantment, and when his lips quivered at the familiar touch of his flute he did not know that where delight ended regret awoke, new-born. It was strange, and not wholly sad, to be 'sorry'—like those sweet autumn songs of his when red leaves came tumbling in gay showers on to the sodden brown earth in the chestnut forests.

'You must not work too hard,' I said. 'You do not know what it means; and the heavy town air will stifle those merry lungs of yours. They are just strong enough for the woods and hills. You will wear them out, Pan, in the noisy world.'

'The birds do not wear out their little lungs,' he laughed. 'And I will be like them, and sing and sing for ever.'

'Till the summer, you mean,' I corrected. 'There are no bird-songs in the winter, Pan.'

He laughed again, tossing his curly head.

'Except mine! Oh, I am wiser than the birds, because if I could not sing in the winter I should

sleep like the flowers till the spring. I could not live if I had no music in my lungs. But even when I am a great singer I shall play on my new flute when I am thinking most of you, and when I am tired of the new things. And you? You will not forget me—say?’

I could not answer. What would life be without him? What would the silent months bring to us, for whom spring and summer and autumn and winter had grown young again at the sweet wild laughter of Pan’s pipings?

II

It was May when Pan left us. The olive-trees stood with their grey fantastic trunks half hidden by a sun-smitten mist of feathery young corn, and a mass of yellow dandelions and buttercups grew wantonly over all the terraces. Through the cool grasses came a subtle stir of life, silent, unseen, magnetic, and through the air a tremor of delicate wings. Over honeyed blossoms the darting hawk-moth hung poised on whirring wings, and everywhere flitted white butterflies and dun-coloured bees, whilst all night long fireflies mocked the nightingales through the woods.

We had a long drought that summer, and by October the parched woods were strewn with withered black olives, left there to rot as useless. And when, too late for the olive harvest, the rains came, they seemed to be driven straight from the bitter white hills, charged with snow and rage.

Such a fierce winter and such a tardy spring

came, we said, to avenge us for tamely submitting to the invaders from the world, who were cutting down our olive-trees by the score, and building trim villas and glaring hotels in their place.

The Philistines had fallen upon us, and every year their inroads made greater havoc; it was useless to groan at each stroke of the axe, at each stone piled on the altar of Progress. So we shrugged our shoulders, and let the inevitable creep nearer and nearer to the hills. But there was one spot we vowed to keep intact, with its roses and its trees, until Pan came back and played to us again on his flute.

During those years news from Pan was as rare as December flowers. But we had proof that he had not forgotten us—on my birthday, on certain feast-days, on the anniversary of that spring evening when we had found him by the river. Not by letters, but by quaintly devised messages; flowers pressed together into symbolic shapes; hearts, to show that he still loved and longed for us; lyres, when the new musical life had taken hold of him; and sometimes, when the need for expression was strongest, merely narrow strips of wood carved with figures and birds and flowers, between whose

lines we read eagerly what our sympathy divined to be the mood then shaping the boy's character.

But at last there came a real message from the world: a cutting from a journal, telling of the *début* of the new singer, Lorenzaccio Lanoni, who had taken Naples by storm, and was to become the greatest tenor of the century. Lorenzaccio Lanoni! How we laughed to think that our little Pan, who played to the goats so merrily on his oaten flute, had grown into so magnificent a hero!

But even at the moment of his triumph we knew that the old simple life was not forgotten; for had he not sent with that prosaic newspaper a miniature flute, delicately and lovingly fashioned after the pattern of the shepherd's pipe he had left with us?

After this the messages were frequent; until at last scarcely a week passed without one of the curious little strips of wood finding its way to us. At first they spoke of triumph and delight; laurel wreaths, roses, and entwined hearts half hidden under garlands of myrtle. Once, the hearts had always been winged, to tell us that his love flew back to us. But there were no wings to the

entwined hearts, and one of them was always carved with more delicate finish than the other.

‘His love is no longer with us, but with a woman,’ we read. ‘Soon we shall hear no more from him. He is nineteen—just the age when love turns boys’ heads. And moreover, Pan is a singer.’

With what eagerness we pondered over the quaintly told love-story, and how we thrilled with Pan when the boyish reverence grew into a passion that could think and breathe nothing but the beloved name! In these days the tablets were carved all over with hearts and flames, and along the borders were chiselled three notes of the musical stave—*La, Do, Ré*. . . . L’Adorée, L’Adorée!

Then came a silence. It was over. He had forgotten us. He would never come to redeem the treasure he had left with us. Love had stolen him from us.

Yet once more, after several months of silence, another sign came from him—short, poignant, tragic. No written words could more eloquently have made known to us that the moment of disillusion had arrived to Pan. On a charred bit of wood we could just discern a broken heart and

broken lyre, roughly and hastily carved, and starred all about with big falling tears. Love had failed him: so we interpreted the broken heart. But why a broken lyre? Was it that in his first bitter disappointment he had turned in anger from his music because it had not power to heal love's wounds instantly and for ever? 'Boys' love is like the wind, swift to come and swift to change,' we said, nodding our heads wisely. 'He will come back to us now; but the first glow of youth will have left him, and when the peace of the woods has healed the smart he will fly back to the world in search of new and lighter loves.' Had we not passed that way ourselves?

For many weeks we heard no more from Pan. But day and night the door of our home stood open, that at whatever hour he came he might be sure of a welcome. And day after day we sat listening for light footsteps running up the path, and for the sweet sound of a flute carolling through the woods; for we could not imagine Pan's return without music and laughter to herald his coming. How we hungered for the merry notes that would fly dancing up the hill to tell us that he had come to forget unkind love and fleeting fame in

the happy woods! How we would rejoice at being together once more, and listen, as of old, to the gay songs of the little shepherd's pipe!

But it all came about quite differently after all. It was May again, and I was resting in the little garden that seemed to have sprung up of itself, a nest of big red roses, amidst the green woods. Overhead birds were chirping, and round the flaming roses hovered transparent white butterflies, just as in the days when Pan used to skip bare-legged up and down between the rows of brilliant blossoms. And suddenly, glancing down the hill, where the olive-trees spread their weird tangled branches over a green sea of misty wild oats, I saw him coming. Not as we had imagined—running and singing up the narrow track, with outstretched hands and sparkling eyes; but slowly, painfully, his shoulders bent and drawn like those of an old man. Nor did I hurry to meet him, with cries of welcome. Something held me motionless, my hands tightening over the flute, from which I never parted now, for fear that he should come and not find it ready for him.

So—though our eyes met, and were drowned in each other's sorrow—not a word passed our lips, as,

with slow, trailing movements and long-drawn, heavy breathing, he dragged his languid limbs along the garden path to where I sat. And then he fell on his knees with a great cry, bowing his head on my lap, where my hands lay over the flute; and I felt hot tears and kisses falling like rain over the little oaten joy of his childhood.

‘Pan! Pan! Come back to us at last! How we have longed for you! Five long years! But nothing is changed, now that we have you again. Oh, hush! hush! Here, you shall forget that there are tears in the world.’

‘Forget?’ He raised his head, fixing his haggard eyes on me. ‘Did I forget you and the dear woods, and the goats, and the birds? And shall I forget the *other* here? Never—never!’

It was still Pan . . . yet not Pan. The same soft brown eyes and small pointed face, the same delicate limbs and sweet voice. But in his eyes glowed a fever of sorrowful passion, and the fallen shoulders and laboured breathing told their own tale of physical collapse.

‘There are the roses,’ he said, a light breaking over his face; ‘just as when I left. How lovely! how lovely!’ He stretched out his arms to them,

and the light faded. 'How they glow and burn in the sunlight . . . red like love . . . red like lovely, passionate, cruel, cruel love!'

'Nothing is cruel here,' I said softly: 'Nature is never cruel.'

'That is true,' he murmured. 'Nothing here was ever cruel. Then love is not here. Because love is cruel, and bitter as the grave.'

'Have you nothing truer than that to teach the birds?' I asked, putting the flute in his hand. 'Have you forgotten all the merry tunes?'

He took the flute and held it against his lips for a long time in silence, whilst over his face passed one rapid emotion after another: anguish, regret, gentle memories, and, gradually, a gleam of hope and gladness.

Then, at the first notes he played, I knew that he had not forgotten the old songs. How they soared, wild and piercing, sweet beyond mortal words! He had found the right magic with which to charm away madness and sorrow.

But suddenly the melody broke off harshly. His poor sunken chest was torn with a long racking cough. The flute fell from his fingers, and dropped unheeded on the ground.

‘Do you remember,’ he whispered painfully, ‘how you told me my lungs were only large enough for the woods and hills? I wished to be cleverer than the birds. But I was wrong . . . I shall never sing again . . . not even on the dear little flute. They say I am dying . . . and so I was . . . dying for want of fresh air and light, and for you, and the cool air amongst the pines. So I came back to you . . . empty-handed . . . without even fame to lay at your feet.’

What the boy’s moral hurt was we could but dimly guess. No hint of it even passed his lips after that first bitter plaint against love’s cruelty. But if the rude world and airless cities had dried the blood in his veins, and broken the music in his lungs, it had left untouched the delicate, flowerlike spirit that used to make him one with the birds and all spring blossoms. And if love has power to wound, it has none the less power to heal; we were sanguine enough to believe that the healing virtues of our woods and hills would restore to Pan his lost music. If *that* were dead . . . then was there no hope for Pan.

We took him to the hills, where he could fill his lungs with the pungent fragrance of the pines,

stretched, lizardlike, for long hours in the scorching sunshine, whilst life-giving airs from the distant snow mountains breathed balm upon body and soul. Around him moved noiselessly the tender-mouthed goats, browsing on rosemary and thyme; and the cool stream fell in tinkling drops from the rock above, as if expectant of the well-known answer from the shepherd-boy's flute. But though the flute always lay beside him, Pan never attempted to play on it. Sometimes, when he thought no one was looking, he would raise it to his lips and, with closed eyes, blow very softly down the tube, until a kind of sigh wavered through the air. Then he would drop his face on his arm and weep silently,—less wise than the birds, who do not die when their voices are broken.

Little by little, it seemed to us that the cough came less violently, and that healthier colour was creeping into his thin brown cheeks. Sometimes, even, we caught the old note of laughter in the boy's voice as he watched the antics of the kids, or when we reminded him of some elfin prank of his childhood.

‘You will sing again yet, Pan,’ I said. ‘Not this year, perhaps; but next spring you will begin again with the birds.’

He shook his head.

‘Never with my voice,’ he answered. ‘But with this—yes,’ and he caressed the flute with his fingers. ‘Yes—it shall send laughter through the woods next spring, Mamina. But not yet. I am not going to make weak music, like a grasshopper. Wait till my lungs are full, and bursting with the sweet sun.’

So we waited, whilst he drank his fill of the ‘sweet sun,’ and the aromatic pines distilled themselves into his veins and poured out their juices to heal his lungs. His old joy in things of nature revived. Birds would hop round him as he lay on the soft thyme, and lizards run along his languid, blue-veined wrist. Then he began to climb the pine-trees and fling brown cones about our ears, as he had done when a child; and finally, he took to roaming alone about the hills, often disappearing for a whole day and night; and each time he came back there was fresh light in his eyes and greater spring in his step. And sometimes, before he came, we would hear the soft laugh, full of some strange, subtle mystery, he sent to herald his coming.

We had not ventured to tell him of the devastation of the olive woods, nor of the growth of the

dusty new town. But as autumn came on we were driven by the cold winds to take shelter in the valleys.

As we passed the reeds by the pebbly, dried-up river, he paused.

‘Do you think *il Nonno* ever came to look for me here?’ he asked.

‘Never! Or rather, he changed into this gnarled olive-tree, and watches over the spot for ever. So he may do. Because we are never going to let you leave us again, Pan.’

‘Never,’ he answered, with his low laugh. ‘Next spring I’ll come and serenade him, and tell him a thousand strange things on my flute to make his wild silver hair flutter. Oh, I feel new life in me! Let us wander through the woods to the old haunts, and to the sea to bathe by moonlight, as we used to do.’

‘To-morrow. To-day you shall only rest under the trees. We have a lifetime before us, remember.’

‘It is good to be at home again,’ he said, stretching his limbs as he lay on the burnt-up grass, staring up at the flickerings of blue sky between the colourless leaves. ‘But the air is not what it is on the

hills. And the terraces are not as green and cool as they used to be.'

'Wait, impatient boy, for the spring. Then your flute shall conjure up flowers and green things to your heart's content.'

'And there is not the same silence. Don't you remember the lovely silence that was like music? What *is* that noise?' he exclaimed, raising himself on his elbow. 'Do you hear? As if trees were being cut down.'

'They are making clearings in the wood. Don't be afraid. They will never come near us.'

'*Here?*' he cried: 'can they be so wicked as to destroy our woods? And then——' his troubled eyes widened, like those of a hunted animal tracked to its lair. 'Oh, I hear sounds like the distant roar of cities—a hum of voices—and the endless, weary rolling of wheels! Where am I? Has the hateful world followed us even here?'

'Hush!' I said, laying my hand over his: 'it shall never find us. We will stay in the old home and mock its foolish noise, until by degrees we shall cease to hear it.'

'How close it comes! Do you hear? Loud laughter——'

‘There has been a *festa* in the church. They are strangers coming back from it. They are only happy. Laughter will never hurt the woods, Pan.’

‘Laughter like *that*!’ he murmured.

‘Now they are singing. Come! Be honest; and confess that such singing is good, whether born of the world or of the woods!’

A man and woman came into sight, walking side by side along the narrow path below us. The woman’s voice rose, pure and full as a bell, to where we were sitting,—so beautiful in its voluptuous tenderness that I held my breath to listen. Now and then her companion croaked back the refrain, in thin, scrappy tones that aroused the loud, rollicking laugh that had vexed Pan’s ears; then again her voice would thrill through the air, half mockingly through all the passion of the words.

Io moriro d’amor, e di contento.

What all this signified to Pan I knew not; but when I turned to look at him I saw, by the strained agony in his eyes and the rush of blood to his cheeks, that life or death had come to him in the

guise of this beautiful, sense-troubling voice from the world.

When the song ended, the boy sprang to his feet, and throwing back his head, drew one long deep breath. Over his eyes and mouth spread a radiant and exultant smile, as if excess of joy, in slaying grief, had revived in him the spirit of immortality that seemed to have animated him as a child. And oh ! the joy and exultation that poured forth between his smiling lips—like the joy and exultation of spring vitalised and made human by some strange thrill of love and passion.

The woman started—hesitated—then, with a defiant shrug of her shoulders, glanced up at the singer, as he stood waiting, still with that glad, conquering smile on his lips.

‘L’adorata ! . . . L’adorata !’ he murmured, stretching out his hands.

Pity passed, like a summer cloud, over her blue eyes ; then, raising her fingers to her lips, she blew him a handful of kisses, with the coquettish, half-deprecating grace of a *prima donna* humouring an exacting audience ; and the next moment she had passed out of sight, only her cruel mocking laugh ringing back to us through the silence.

I flung my arms round Pan. But he pushed me away ; and, pressing his hands on his chest, struggled once more to force his broken voice. Then with a cry he fell upon the discarded flute ; and as he pressed it to his mouth I saw the fatal rush of life-blood crimsoning his lips, and making mute the little oaten singer.

It seems to us, who wait and long for him, that the world has grown old since the death of Pan. The woods show grey and russet, where of old our eyes leapt to green and gold ; and once more the nightingale sings to us of eternal sorrow.

But often, when a south wind quickens the heavy tops of the trees, and sunset flushes the red pine-needles at our feet, the old dream returns. And, though we know it is in vain, our thrilled hearts are silent, listening for the sweet, wild laughter of Pan's pipings.

A SHEPHERD LOVER



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I

HERMAS, the shepherd, lay face downwards amongst the thyme, heedless of the gradually dying tinkle of the goat-bells, as the unwatched herd strayed wantonly down the mountain-side. Broken at his feet lay the heavy clasp-knife that had so cunningly fashioned a half-circle of grapes and vine leaves and twisted tendrils round the wooden bowl, in which it had been his wont to carry the first warm morning milk to Alcippe of the Golden Hair. Always, in return, she would throw to him a rose, or a sprig of blossom, or perhaps stand at the threshold for a few sweet, swift moments, and let him hold her tender hand in his awkward, sunburnt fingers.

She was white and red and golden as the dawn, when little gold-edged clouds drive away the first pink flush of the morning, and the kindness or scorn of her laughter had power to place him with the gods, or to make him lament that he had ever been

born ; and on just such an evening as this, whilst the red sun scorched the hill-top, they had plighted their troth.

All this had been yesterday ; and to-day Alcippe was gone—stolen away in the night to the city across the hills, with Milon, the athlete from Tanagra. Would that to-day had never dawned ! Would that the myrtle had withered before he bound it into long garlands to hang before her lintel, only to find there the still fresh wreaths of his rival mocking him with their silent triumph.

It was Jason, the herdsman, who brought him the news, jeering at him as he passed by driving his herd of lean cows from the higher pastures to the meadows. ‘Time now to stir thy idle bones, slug-gard. Whom should I meet coming over the hill but Milon the runner, with Alcippe of the Golden Hair, hand in hand like a week-old lovers.’

‘May thy lips be blistered, bringer of evil tidings,’ the shepherd had cried fiercely ; ‘ bringer of evil tidings that are false ! ’

But when evening came, and down in the valley the shepherds were dancing to the sound of their flutes, Hermas, the nimble-footed, lay mourning on the mountain slopes amongst the falling dew, whilst

the scarlet sun burned the crest of the hill until it smouldered into the cold ashy-grey of early twilight before the blue night comes. Then, suddenly, his thoughts turned from Alcippe of the Golden Hair to her lover, and rage drove away the sorrow burning at his heart. Rage the fiercer because it was twofold ; divided into bitter envy of Milon for his advantages, and anger with himself for his own inferiority.

He remembered it now. How Alcippe had taunted him because he was not fleet of foot and skilled in exercises of the Palæstra like the stranger from Tanagra. And how, over-confident in his strong limbs, he had challenged Milon to run a course from the village to the cypress grove on the hillside, and had known shame for the first time in his easy, indolent life.

Even yet, in his memory, he could see the flying figure of the athlete, as it darted past him, his swift feet seeming scarcely to touch the dusty earth, but, like the winged Hermes, to skim with effortless ease over the hot white path ; and how, at the goal, he had stood lightly poised on his feet as one eager once more to begin the race, his chest heaving gently, his firm white flesh gleaming ; whilst

Hermas, hot and exhausted, had fallen with gasping breath on the sward, cursing the weight of his body, and filled with a strange vague anger against what was animal and cumbrous in his limbs. Yet, once again, trusting to that mere animal strength which used to be his pride and boast, he had accepted Milon's half-scornful challenge to throw the quoit over a cypress-tree that grew, tall and straight, just below them on the path. Here, too, he courted defeat. He was a whole hand's-breadth taller than his rival, twice as broad across the shoulders, and flushed with health and vigour. But, though few of the country lads could drive as straight a furrow, or wield a reaping-hook with such even strokes as Hermas, he could not send the disc spinning sharp-edged through the air like Milon the athlete.

Time after time he essayed it. And, though he gathered up all his strength for the effort, it seemed to him that his energies, in their untrained vehemence, were like an overflowing brook whose waters spread, wide and shallow, over the near-lying meadows; whereas the concentrated vigour of the athlete ran fiercely through the thews and sinews of his spare brown arm, like a torrent rushing

between mountain rocks to the sea. Never, though he burst his veins in the effort, could Hermas master that elusive trick of the wrist, the quiet backward spring of the arm, straight from the shoulder, that sent the disc soaring like a bolt, sheer over the tall cypress.

Then the jealousy of rivalry had fallen before the eager admiration of generous youth for the possession in another of some physical virtue lacking to himself. Hermas marvelled at the technical skill of the gymnast, whilst city-bred Milon praised the wasted splendour of the shepherd's limbs, with a good-humoured laugh at the over-lavish flesh, and the heavy indolence developed by long hours of drowsing on the hot hills.

'Battening in the sun and the wind like kine on fat pastures,' he had scoffed. 'Fit only to be decked out with ribbons and garlands and led to the sacrifice.'

And at the taunt Alcippe had flung back her head and laughed, her red lips curling over her small teeth, whilst hot words sprang, unspoken, to Hermas' throat.

All this had slipped from his mind long ago. But now it came rushing back; and with it the

same intangible, half-physical sense of shame; of something gross and superfluous weighing upon his limbs, and likening him, as Milon had said, to fat kine browsing stupidly in the meadows.

He raised his head and flung himself into a sitting posture. Night had come, and the moon hung in a cloudless sky. Far below, across the plain, a soundless wind darkened, now and then, the white sea, and flew up the hill in warm, salt-sweet gusts.

Above, on the hill, the stone-pines, heavy with night, loomed against the moonlit sky; and close by, near the shrine of the goddess, the black cypresses stood like sentinels, thrusting their inviolate spears into the white night.

A kind of awe fell upon the shepherd with the calming of his blood. There was a sense of unseen silent things—all the remote yet friendly influences of night—soothing the spirit; until the moon, friend of lovers, hushed him into dreamless sleep.

He opened his eyes with a start. The sun had risen over the eastern hills, just where they broke off abruptly into the gulf. And, standing against the cold yellow light, he saw Myrto, the daughter

of his master Aristis, holding in her little brown hands a bowl of foaming milk and an oatcake freshly baked.

Myrto was the only child of Aristis. Her hands knew no labour but the distaff and delicate embroideries, and she wore fair white linen that fell about her feet like lily petals over their stamens. Myrto of the Haughty Lips, they called her; but she was sweet as nuts when she smiled, and her voice was low and soothing as a brook murmuring under dock leaves.

Startled out of his sleep, and filled with wonder at the sight of his master's daughter standing there so meekly, with the bowl of milk between her two hands, Hermas stammered out some feeble excuse. He had been overtaken by sleep—had forgotten himself—and the herd had strayed. A thousand maledictions on his drowsiness!

‘Nay, drink,’ she said softly, holding the wooden bowl to his lips; ‘the herd came back safely to the fold. I heard their bells jingling as they pressed against the enclosure;—and I knew that you would not be there.’

Her eyes had as many lights and shadows as low hills in April, and more tender than the flowers

that grow on their slopes were they as they bent down on the shepherd.

He took a long draught of the milk, its warmth and fragrance pouring new life into his frame. Then the strangeness of her coming brought him suddenly to his feet.

‘It is not fit that my master’s daughter should serve her father’s herdsman !’ he cried, troubled and abashed. ‘What would Aristis say ? He would send me from his service, sleep-sodden lout that I am ! Good for nothing—not even for the light labour of a shepherd.’

‘I am the daughter of Aristis,’ she answered.

Hermas hung his head at the rebuke. Though to have been slack in the service of Aristis might be blameworthy, a few sharp words would have made master and servant quits. But when to serve Aristis ill was also to serve ill Myrto of the Haughty Lips, who, instead of blame, brought to him sweet womanly comfort, that abashed him with a sense of unfitness—nay, half angered him against her, as if in tending him with her own hands she had reversed the natural order of things, and put him at some undefinable disadvantage.

Then, as his eyes fell on the carved bowl, he

clenched his hands and his face flushed hotly. Alcippe—Milon—all the enraging sorrow of the night rushed upon him again.

Myrto's eyes followed his.

‘You looked so tired, so tired in your sleep,’ she said hurriedly. ‘Your very hair was wet with the night-dew. And I thought—he will catch an ague—and it is ill to catch an ague fasting—so I ran.’ . . .

‘You found me sleeping? You?’

He stared. What was Myrto doing out alone on the hill at that hour?

Over the girl's soft olive cheeks the red glowed in answer. She dropped her eyes, speaking in quick, apologetic tones.

‘Seeing you so cold and tired, I thought—there being no one else to do it—I would run home with your bowl, and fill it full to the brim with milk from the she-goat with the white thigh. Thus none would say that the pails were fuller than their wont.’

It was his own goat, his one possession, tended by him amongst his master's herd for love of Alcippe, that he might bring her the morning gift of warm new milk that earned for him a rose or a smile to begin the day's work on.

For a moment he wondered if Myrto mocked him. Who does not mock at a deserted lover? He flung his arms over his head, stretching away the heavy sleep that had numbed his senses.

‘A murrain on the she-goat,’ he said roughly, hurling the bowl from him; ‘a curse light on her milk and on the cup that bears it. Let who will take her, for I have no need of her any longer.’

‘The innocent often bear curses meant for the guilty,’ answered the girl sententiously. ‘Who shall gainsay it, if it be the will of the gods?’

They walked a little way, in silence, towards the farmstead. Then Myrto spoke, lightly and gaily, as if she would wean Hermas from his sullen humour.

‘Truly, Hermas who lies dreaming all night on the hills, careless of his master’s flocks, has been bewitched, like the shepherd beloved of the Lady Selene. I find him sleeping, and when he awakes, behold, he is dumb! ’

‘Speech ill becomes a heart that is bitter,’ he answered curtly.

The laugh died on Myrto’s lips.

‘Then it is true that she has gone?’ she asked between her teeth, like one struggling to keep undue harshness out of her voice.

‘Is it true in the bitter winter nights, when the goats crowd together against the wall, and the wind screams in your eyes and teeth, that the sun does not shine? Then is it true that she has gone?’

‘With Milon?’

‘With Milon.’

‘With Milon,’ she repeated, half to herself. And the scorn of her tones stirred the heart of the shepherd. He held his head higher, and moved with swifter, lighter tread. So stimulating to a man is subtle praise from a woman. Yet, lest the scorn should be for Alcippe, he felt constrained to defend her choice.

‘Milon has twice been victor in the games,’ he said. ‘And see how deftly his hair is trimmed. Nor does he wear old sheepskins smelling as strong as a month-old cheese. And, if his thoughts are like a fox when it lurks round a farm, yet is his tongue as smooth as the oil on sour new wine. Women love us for these things, not for the garlands we hang round their doors, nor for the hearts we let them trample like dust under their feet. Let be, if the gods will have it so!’

‘I, too, am a woman,’ she said; ‘and the gar-

lands my lover hung round my door should lie over my neck until they dropped like burnt-out ashes, and my feet should tread so softly on his heart that lay in the dust, that he would think they were my hands that stroked it.'

'Yet Diocleides, the son of Nicias, who strips the hills naked of flowers for Myrto of the Haughty Lips, laments through the night like a frog croaking in the marshes.'

'Diocleides is not my lover. Let him deafen the night frogs.'

'Diocleides croaks for Myrto of the Haughty Lips, and I for Alcippe of the Golden Hair,' laughed Hermas harshly. 'Truly comical is the plight of a lover!'

'Is there no comfort for your sorrow?'

'None, but in silence. So I pray you leave me, lest I forget that I speak with my master's daughter. The gods be with you.'

Often during the hot afternoons, whilst the shepherd, still brooding over his trouble, herded his flock under the shady stone-pines, Myrto would come to him, hands and heart laden with compassion. And though he had said there was no comfort but in silence, it eased him to pour out to

her his love for Alcippe. The girl's softness and sweetness soothed, without disturbing, his passion ; and when for two days she did not come, rage fell upon him with renewed force, and on the third day, when he saw her walking towards him with her distaff in her hand, he felt something like anger against her as against a faithless friend.

She came leisurely, pale and proud, her eyes on her distaff, and would have passed him by. But Hermas—never forgetful that he was her father's hind, yet half injured at her neglect—arrested her.

‘To-day,’ he said, ‘it is Myrto of the Haughty Lips who passes. Has the daughter of Aristis no word to throw to her father's goatherd?’

She paused, winding the flax round and round her finger, her eyes still lowered.

‘What would you of me?’ she asked coldly.

He laughed.

‘Nay, I know not.’

‘Ah, but I know,’ she cried, raising her eyes, aflame with pent-up anger ; ‘to listen to your weeping and puling, like a nurse humouring a sick child. To say, “How pitiful!” here, “How pitiful!” there. I weary of it ; and of the cuckoo

cry, “*Is Alcippe back? . . . Is Alcippe not the fairest of the fair? . . . Is there hair so yellow, or heart so hard as Alcippe’s?*” Nay, in good sooth, it wearies me. What is Alcippe to me, that I should listen to the lamentations of her lover? What is she but a wretched light-o’-love, and he but a whining lack-spirit of a woman?’

Hermas dropped his hand on her shoulder with a grip that made the girl shudder. She stared up into his face, and though her lips curled with pain and pride, in her eyes laughed a defiant joy. He was more beautiful in his wrath than in his sorrow; and the fierce clasp of his fingers on her soft flesh thrilled her like a caress.

‘Unsay it!’ he insisted roughly; ‘unsay it! No light-o’-love, but one whose sandals even Myrto the daughter of Aristis should be proud to touch.’

Again she laughed back at him, whether most with scorn or most with joy it were hard to tell.

‘I unsay it. Unworthy indeed am I to touch the sandals of one beloved by Hermas the shepherd!’

He released her, and she sank on the ground, hiding her face for a moment in her hands. Then, seeing him looking down on her so ruefully,

ashamed of his insolence, her mockery melted into kindness, and, though her breath still came tumultuously, her eyes were gentle.

‘Yours is no woman’s hand,’ she said merrily ; ‘nor does it know when it has a woman to deal with.’

‘Maledictions on it !’ he murmured ; ‘I have said it before . . . I am a useless clown, good for nothing . . . fit only, as *he* said, to be classed with the beasts of the field.’

Myrto curled herself up on the soft sward, and looked up at him, still with a little scorn in her long dark eyes. All about them the quiet goats wandered in and out of the stems of the high pines, amongst the sweet white heather ; and into the shady well hard by, water, oozing through the overhanging rock, fell in monotonous, cooling drops. Hermas leant on his long staff, his eyes fixed carelessly on Myrto ; yet, though she was fairer than the violet crocus growing against her slim brown wrist, he, in his yearning for Alcippe, was blind to her beauty.

‘Your hand has strength,’ she said presently ; ‘you are straighter than the poplar growing by the bridge leading to my father’s meadow, and in the

dance your feet are swifter than wild bees thirsting for honey.

‘Is it not said that though the barbarians deem it the act of a wicked man to carry off a woman by force, still more do they call him foolish who troubles to avenge the deed? but that the Greeks waged war for the Lacedæmonian woman? What would you? To be a fool and a Greek, or a wise man and a barbarian?’

‘Ten times a fool and a Greek,’ he cried, striking the ground with his staff.

‘Were I a man and a Greek, and a fool for the sake of a woman,’ she went on, her voice swerving for a moment into that strange contempt, ‘I know well what I would do. I would conquer my rival on his own ground. If he spake soft words, I would speak softer; if he ran fleetly as the winged Hermes, I would run fleeter than the rays of the sun that reach the goal with one bound.’

She leant forward, speaking low and eagerly, and in the fire of her enthusiasm, the effeminate apathy of his sorrow flamed into the fierce delight of contest.

‘Conquer him? Ay! But how? But how?’

he exclaimed, bending down to catch her answer. 'How master all the secrets of the Palæstra, when my days are given to herding brutes on the steep hills? Teach me how, Myrto of the Haughty Lips, and a tawny goatskin with silver claws shall be yours, and a cup carved with bees and flowers.'

'Your days are given to herding my father's flocks,' she answered, 'and your nights to sleep; whilst, on the hill-top, summer stars lighten the long straight path all through the night. Sleep is no man's master. . . . But see! the brown ewe with the crooked horn has strayed a mile away. Is it thus you tend the herd even in the day-time?'

II

NIGHT after night, when the herd was in the fold, and Aristis and his household slept, Myrto stood at her window gazing on the hills, where the wide smooth road stretched for miles along the undulating wooded ridge, from the great cloud-capped peak to the sea.

On moonlight nights the trees fringing the sharp crest of these hills—the motionless stone-pines and cypresses—stood regally against the luminous sky, like priestesses awaiting the divine presence. In that mystical silver air they seemed to widen and grow to unearthly size—remote, mysterious—solemn, dark-robed guardians of some secret valley beyond the ridge, where occult rites, unseen by mortal eyes, were celebrated, in silence, under the moon.

And, sometimes, Myrto, nursing her hopeless passion for the shepherd, would feel, for a moment, that through the spiritlike silence and serenity the

goddess, kind to lovers, would surely manifest herself to her ; so the air palpitated with the light and mystery of her unseen presence.

Now and then, across the open spaces, or darting into sight between the straight stems of the trees, sped a human figure—young, eager, ardent—racing through the clear, clean air like one filled with some strange frenzy, only to be calmed by this weird, solitary pastime.

The night stillness, the frozen rigidity of the black trees against the immaculate purity of the moonlit sky, seemed to invest that one restless, living figure with superhuman swiftness and vitality ; until, to the girl's excited fancy, it moved with the strength and grace of one of the immortal gods.

To Hermas itself it was as a purification. His sanity returned, and with it the exultant self-confidence of lusty youth. At first he felt, as he had done after competing with Milon, that he was the clumsy slave of his own uncurbed strength. Except during the harvests, he had but little active labour ; the rest of the year was passed in the enforced physical indolence of a shepherd's life. He was as hardy as the mountain rocks, indifferent

to summer heats and winter storms; but he was by nature a dreamer, fonder of playing his flute on the hills, and of cherishing his passion for Alcippe, than of exerting himself in games with the young men in the village; it was enough for him to know that hardly a shepherd of his own age would venture to try a fall with him, and that, when required, he could always depend on the strength of his arms to hold his own with the rest of the world. But when it was a question of speed and suppleness, he was at a disadvantage. His own body seemed to irk and hinder him, to exhaust him by the superfluous violence of its efforts, leaving him in the discouragement of lassitude without having brought him nearer achievement.

But, little by little, the bonds of flesh fell from him. His limbs moved freely in their sockets, answering to his will like well-trained horses to the light hand of a charioteer. He began to revel in his toil for its own sake, for the exhilarating delight in swift, rhythmical movement that, to an athlete or dancer, makes the practice of his art a kind of delirious joy—a visible and tangible expression of form and harmony. Thus, Hermas literally ran from a languid boyhood to virile

manhood. Though he called himself, more than ever, the lover of Alcippe, his love-sickness was cured; and when, day after day, Myrto asked him of what he was thinking when he stood on the hill, neither running nor resting, but looking across the inland valley, with his arms outstretched before him, he would answer, already triumphant in thought, 'I was looking down on the city where the races will be held next spring, and thinking of the day when I shall win Alcippe away from her athlete.'

Sometimes the girl replied with some gentle scoff; but at others she turned away silently, and left him; perhaps for two days, without a word or look. And at such times Hermas missed her presence as a well during summer droughts misses the cold water dripping from the rock. She was nothing to him as a woman, but all he had in the world as a friend. When his courage failed, or weariness clogged his heels, it was Myrto who urged him on with some stimulating phrase that once more inflamed him against Milon, or made his veins tingle with love and desire. He knew that night after night she timed him, as he raced, by the beating of her pulses; but that her candid sym-

pathy was the subtle love of a woman striving to turn the current of his thoughts, never for a moment entered his mind—so softly, gently, had she crept into his life. Yet, because of Alcippe, whose laugh rang louder and whose hair shone in the sun, she was no more to him than is waving maidenhair to the rocks whose grim sides it covers.

In the winter Aristis died, and his flocks and meadows passed into the possession of Myrto. Ceaselessly her old nurse Zanthippe urged her to cross the hills, and choose a husband from amongst the rich young men in the city; but she would not—waiting for the shepherd to speak.

They met often in these days, carrying libations to the tomb of Aristis; and at such times, modestly, as befitted a maid famed for her reserve, Myrto sought to reveal to Hermas the good fortune that might be his, speaking in lover's riddles, and answered always at cross purposes.

‘When I die,’ she would murmur, ‘see that there is carven on my tomb a shepherd's crooked staff and a shepherd's flute; and may none but shepherds place garlands there.’ And he, unwitting, would answer, ‘And on mine let there be graven, “He

was slain by a cruel love." Or, 'On mine be the wreath of a victor in the games, and beneath it, "For the love of Alcippe" written in fair letters.'

Thus winter slipped into spring, and it happened, as the great day drew near, that they met at the shrine of the goddess, to which Myrto bore an offering of honey-cakes and a wide bowl of new milk. And there Hermas brought the thighs of his she-goat, burning them upon twigs of juniper.

No word passed between them, nor questions as to the boon desired of the goddess. But suddenly, as they were parting to go their different ways, Myrto fixed her soft eyes on the shepherd.

'Of what were you thinking,' she asked once more, 'when you stood motionless on the hill last night, looking down over the valley with your arms raised above your head as one who prays to the gods?'

'I was thinking of the day when I shall be first in the foot-race,' he answered with glistening eyes, 'and when Milon of Tanagra shall recognise in me his better.'

III

THAT night, as she watched his distant figure racing along the brow of the hill, Myrto remembered his words, and knew that the lust of contest had entered into the heart vowed to Alcippe; and it seemed to her that at last the moment had come when she might go to him, and tell him that she and all she possessed were his for the asking, and that in stooping to her father's shepherd she placed herself on the throne of thrones.

She raised her upturned palms to the moon and prayed for a blessing on her errand.

‘Lady Selene, kind mother of the sorrowful, of those whose eyelids know not sleep, make him pitiful to me, my beloved, the delight of my eyes.’ Then, girding up her long robe, she sped along the steep pebbly path that led to the hills.

To outrun Milon.

Hermas, too, was thinking chiefly of his own

words as he ran his lonely course under the stars, rejoicing in the freedom and swiftness of his limbs, as a lark must rejoice when its young wings first lift it to the skies.

Already the applause of the onlookers seemed to buzz in his ears, the love-light in Alcippe's face to leap to his eyes, the laurel wreath to weigh lightly on his brow. Yes! he would meet her no longer as a bashful country clown, awkward as a calf; but as conqueror and master—a lover fit for a princess. The probation that had refined, and stimulated his body had refined and stimulated his mind. The very image of Alcippe had undergone some starry transformation in his memory—mingled, as it were, with his half-formed, reverent conception of what the goddess herself would be like should she, in one of his glad night races, manifest herself to him—an Alcippe whose golden hair was brighter yet less vivid, whose voice was clearer yet less loud, and in whose ways was a touch of mystery and dreamy calm.

Should the goddess appear! Such things were known. And now that the great day drew near, might she not reward him for his perseverance, and his loyalty to an unkind love?

So, for one moment, when he saw a white-robed form moving quickly along the mountain path, his heart stood still with awe and rapture. As she came running towards him, like some wild white bird, her feet were lighter than falling leaves, and her unbound hair fluttered behind her like quivering wings. No goddess, but a Mænad racing the night winds in the delirium of mystic ecstasy. Then seeing that it was only Myrto, partly for mirth, partly because he was vexed with her for being so strange and wild in her ways, the shepherd turned lightly on his heels, and, with a mocking laugh, fled from her, now slackening his paces until she was within hand's reach of him, now darting out of touch with the easy agility of a bird on the wing. And his beauty and the supple grace of his body stirred her into so passionate a desire for his love that she forgot the weariness of the way thither and the fatigue of her bruised feet, and when, at last, Hermas laughingly yielded to her pursuit, to his amaze she sank on her knees, and flung her arms round his ankles, her soft hair falling over his feet.

‘Love me,’ she cried, ‘or I die !’

He tried to free himself, gently, lest he should

hurt her tender arms ; but her clasp tightened, and he heard her sobs shuddering through the dark veil of hair.

‘Whether this be jest or whether it be madness,’ he said sternly, ‘it is a wrong that none would dare do to Myrto, the daughter of Aristis, but Myrto herself . . . that she should kneel to a shepherd and beg for favours that are no longer his to give.’

Then, as she still knelt there, wailing and clinging to his feet, a sudden terror came over him of this strange girl, a fear, as it were, of his own chivalrous reverence for her delicacy and gentleness, as if her soft hair round his feet entangled him, body and soul, in some inexorable spell.

‘Leave me !’ he cried, pulling her roughly to her feet ; ‘I have no love for you. You weary me with your importunities. Would the gods this were some foolish jest ; even then, shame be on the thought that conceived it !’

‘A jest ?’ she said. ‘Even so ; a jest,’ and laughed so merrily and softly to herself, as if amused at his credulity, that for the moment he was deceived into believing her.

But when she was out of sight he stretched his

arms over his head with a deep sigh of relief, as a man does who has escaped a great danger.

Then despair came upon Myrto because he would not love her. And knowing it was hopeless, it suddenly flashed into her heart one day, as she sat at her loom, that she would give him the greatest joy in the world, and ask for no other reward than the knowledge that happiness had come to him from her hands.

For she knew—none better—that were he ten times victor in the races, if he went empty-handed his quest was vain. Alcippe, to whom luxuries and soft living were dearer than love, apprised herself (as a farmer apprises his cattle) as the possession of the highest bidder.

Then it was that Zanthisppe lamented loudly that her charge had lost her wits, and rated her like a child for her obstinate folly. That she should resign half her goods—her well-fed herds and the heavy leathern purse of money acquired by the sale of one of the fat cornfields—that she should pass these as a free gift to Hermas, the shepherd, that he might wed a daubed and flighty quean, seemed to her past all common-sense and

fitness; and that he should accept it, a brazen insolence. But the girl was obdurate.

‘Nay; he shall not be to blame. How should he refuse what is offered, not to him, but to his beloved as a bridal gift?’

Nor could he refuse it; yet no word of thanks passed his lips as she made the hurried speech in which she pressed upon him that it was merely a gift of love to her friend whom she had played with as a child—merely a legacy due from her dead father to a faithful servant; striving, striving through such contradictious incoherencies, to rob it of the bitter taste of charity. But a scarlet flush of shame dyed his face as he listened, and his eyes blazed under their downcast lids.

‘To-day, when you go to the city for the festival,’ she ended, ‘that she may see you are no empty-handed lover, drive the herd before you, and take with you this fair embroidered robe as a wedding gift from a sister to a sister. For the rest—it is but fitting wage to one who has served so faithfully the house of Aristis. Farewell! and the gods be with you.’

Still he said no word, but his eyelids quivered, and his lips moved as if a hot answer burned them.

Her emembered how Alcippe's feet shone white as milk on the greensward ; but whiter still the starry Narcissus growing against the shapely brown feet and delicate ankles of Myrto. Then his eyes crept upwards from her feet to her face, and he knew that she was beautiful.

‘ All that you have said shall be done,’ he replied. ‘ But more precious than well-fed goats and fair raiment will be the victor’s crown that I shall bring to my beloved.’

‘ Yea,’ she murmured ; ‘ precious indeed shall that gift be to Alcippe.’

‘ Farewell, and a joyous life be yours,’ he answered. ‘ Alcippe of the Golden Hair is like the gaudy poppies that flaunt in harvest-time amongst the wheat. But Myrto of the Haughty Lips is as the flower of the myrtle, that grows on the mountain and is hidden in dark leaves ; but it gleams like a star when it nestles in your hand.’

‘ . . . All along the meadows,’ she answered softly, ‘ where the yellow corn springs, scarlet poppies wave like the brown sails of the fishing-boats when they redden on the golden sea at sundown. And they make merry the heart of the passer-by.’

‘ . . . Sweeter than new wine is myrtle on the

lips, and softer than the south wind in summer. And its blossoms are shaped like the stars that lighten the dark nights of winter.'

'... The juice of the wild poppy brings dear sleep to tired lids when a burning heart drives rest from the pillow.'

'... And a wreath of fair myrtle is a guerdon when the goal is reached ; and fresher and sounder the sleep that comes to the wreathed brow of the victor, than the heavy slumber of those who are lulled by poppy-juice into rest from sorrow.'

Thus, voice answering to voice, until the sounds lost form and meaning, they drew apart. And Myrto, glad at heart, stood gazing on the uplands, until, along the crest of the hill, as the sun set, there passed the shepherd driving his herd—black, slow-moving, peaceful forms against the fiery sky.

All through the great day, as she sat at her spinning-wheel, Myrto's thoughts pierced the hills, and were in the city. She saw the crowded circus, the excited faces, and Hermas racing over the sand-strewn course, as she had seen him race, night after night, on the hills—his alert form darting ahead of his fellows, like an arrow from the bow, his shining

eyes fixed on the goal. The laurel wreath . . . and Alcippe . . . and a thought of Myrto, who had given them their delight. . . .

‘Well may you work,’ grumbled Zanhippe, ‘since you have squandered half the wealth of Aristis. It is time—and beyond it—when you should choose a strong arm to husband what is left. Ay! and to keep a strong hand over your follies.’

‘Soon, good Zanhippe, soon,’ answered the girl. ‘There is time enough—here, where time goes but slowly.’

For two days she watched the path from the hills, and on the second evening, Jason, coming home from the city, paused before her door.

‘What news of the games?’ she asked.

‘Good news,’ he answered. ‘Aristippus was twice successful in the chariot races . . . and Megacles, the ill-conditioned cur of the iron wrists, breaking the axle of his chariot at the first round, was dragged over the course like a fish at the end of a line.’

‘What news of the foot-races?’

‘I am coming to that. In the short race—nay, have patience!—in the short race who should win, full of mettle as a colt, but Hermas, the shepherd? And in the long race, who again, but Hermas, the shepherd?’

The girl clapped her hands.

‘And tell me, good Jason, saw you Alcippe of the Golden Hair? And did she smile upon him after the race?’

‘Smile upon him? Why, in truth, they say that, since he brought her so goodly a portion from Myrto, she is stark mad for love of him. But he! never was so sulky a lover. Not a word to a woman . . . nor yet has he hung his wreath at any shrine in the city.’

‘Haply he keeps it for the shrine on the hill,’ she murmured. ‘But we did not look to see him back. Strange, strange, if it should be so.’

Then her heart was merry, as she sat at her wheel, and sang hymns with the spring birds; and Zanthippe, nodding her head sagely, spoke in coaxing tones.

‘Sorrow soon flies from the young. Sing away, my bird, till thy mate comes. But choose quickly, lest other birds sing louder and catch him flying on the wing.’

‘I have chosen,’ she said.

. . . For on the hills, coloured like a dappled fawn-skin, she saw her shepherd coming swiftly down the mountain-side towards her.



SERENATA



S E R E N A T A

I

THE moon, floating with silver serenity through the electric blue of the frosty sky, shone like a promise of joy over the slumbering world. The mass of the forest lay black against the sky, except where, here and there, a sprinkle of hoar-frost on the branches of the pines caught the moonlight in diamond sprays. On the outskirts of this wood a small clearing lay amongst the pines, like a fallen star—a spot breathing of peace and rest. From below, through the scattered stems of the trees, came glimpses of the university town at the foot of the hill, its lights twinkling through the mystic blue moonshine as glowworms might gleam through the lucent depths of still waters.

A young man, standing motionless and deep in thought in the little open space, was watching, with a kind of unwilling eagerness, the pathway leading up from the town. He was a student, young, and

shabbily dressed. His business on this solitary spot was the result of nothing less commonplace than a brawl in a tavern over a woman ; yet something marked him as one whose natural place was not amidst sordid surroundings. He was tall and well made, with open, fearless blue eyes, that seemed to see further than those of other men. His heart was divided between the pursuit of knowledge and a philanthropic love for his fellow-creatures ; his aim in life to be a leader of men through intellectual and moral power—to seek first of all the truth for himself, and then to impart it to others. He cared nothing for women, in the sense that his fellow-students cared for them ; yet it was for the sake of a woman that he was engaged in an unequal duel with the best swordsman in the province. It seemed as if, after all, *the good, the true, and the beautiful* were only to be served by his death. Yet, this being so, to whom would the good accrue ? Something of this he was thinking as he waited for his adversary, fully conscious that the odds were heavily against him.

‘*Am Ganzen, Guten, Schönen ; Resolut zu leben—resolut zu leben*,’ he repeated to himself. ‘Yes, easy enough to live for it when one has a natural bent

towards the beautiful, which *is* the good. But when it comes to dying for it, and not being too sure after all that one is dying for that and not for some quite personal cause—jealousy, or pharisaism, or some foolish chimera—well, one hates to die like a fool. If one were philosopher enough one might smile at the irony of it: a crooked world, welcome a swift release. But I—’ He glanced up at the wide sky, with its splendour of light, and flung his arms towards it. ‘Beautiful world, I love you!’ he whispered, with a sudden passion of regret. ‘I meant to be one with you—to learn your secrets, to share your wisdom and your power; and now I am to be run through by a drunken scamp for the sake of a girl who is nothing to me.’

Through the crisp night air cut the clear tones of the cathedral clock striking the half-hour; and a moment later Conrath von Hardenfeldt saw a figure hurrying up the path with agile steps, and rejoiced, with the inconsequent feverishness of youth, that the hour had come.

When the new-comer reached the clearing, he drew his sword with a swaggering flourish, then glanced, with an ill-concealed sneer, at the silent

figure awaiting him. He was short and spare, with a peculiarly plain face, only redeemed from absolute coarseness by the delicate curves of sensually mobile lips. Physical advantages seemed to be all with Conrath von Hardenfeldt—tall and muscular, his eyes lit with the fire of enthusiasm that marks a leader of men; but a practised observer would have seen that in a trial of force the chances lay with the other. Conrath's power was purely intellectual, his swiftness purely mental; the lithe form of Eberhardt had the wiry agility of an athlete, and his reputation as a swordsman was established. For a moment the two men stood in silence, Conrath looking down on his companion with the calm of one who looks beyond events for their cause and effect. His predominating thought was that it was ignominious to be killed by a cur like Eberhardt; but not for a moment did he regret the action that had led to the quarrel.

‘You are first at the tryst,’ began Eberhardt. ‘You show all the eagerness of a girl with her first lover: the hour has not yet struck.’

‘Knowing the probable result of the tryst,’ replied Conrath, smiling down on him from his

superior height, 'I preferred spending my last hour here, amongst the sights I have the folly to care for, to drowning it in a tavern, or stifling it in the bad air of a second-rate lodging-house.'

Eberhardt made no reply for a moment. This young giant, with his flashes of genius, his college successes, his sanity of temperament, always filled him with a passion of envious hatred; and when he spoke his sullen eyes blazed into vindictive scorn.

'You assume rightly on one matter,' he answered. 'This is in all probability your last hour; I mean to kill you. Your meeting me here to-night is merely a form of suicide. But first, I should like to know your reason for thwarting me. Nothing would make me forgive you; but, if you loved her, at least I should understand you.'

'It was not love. I thwarted you because I believe in woman's sanctity, and did not choose to see you drag her to hell to gratify a moment's passion.'

'I loved her, God curse you!' muttered the other, thrusting his evil countenance close under Conrath's eyes. 'I loved her, mark you, and you turned her from me: for that I mean to kill you. But, should

I fail, your life shall be but a living death. So long as we both live, I will dog your footsteps, and tear from you what makes the breath of your being. If it is fame, I will ruin you in the sight of men; if it is love, I will turn it into dust and ashes. You shall *feel* me every hour you live!"

"Your virtue is thoroughness," replied Conrath, with a bow of mock courtesy. "Listen! there is the signal."

The long, slow tones of the cathedral clock vibrated through the air. The moon, risen now to mid-heaven, turned the spot on which they stood to a silver flooring. Conrath, playing with his bared sword, watched the swift blue light rushing up the blade.

"You are very calm," said Eberhardt, staring at him curiously. "Have you no fear of death?"

"None. It is but passing out of a narrow chamber into a wider one—a sudden sight of the knowledge after which we are groping here. Why should I fear?"

"And fame? power?" muttered the other, with a harsh laugh.

For one second Conrath's eyes contracted with sharp distress; then he tossed his student's cloak to

the ground, and moved to the centre of the circular clearing.

It was easy to see from the first what the result would be. Conrath was no swordsman. His advantages were those of height and coolness; nor did he make the most of these, being apparently only intent upon parrying his enemy's attacks. His antagonist, on the other hand, brought all his skill to play, intensified by an access of violent hatred. But, suddenly, his foot slipped on the frozen ground, and he fell heavily on his side. It was only by a desperate effort that Conrath turned his sword aside, in time to inflict nothing worse than a skin-deep wound on the cheek. For one flash of thought he had felt the fever of triumphant hate; then he stood motionless, leaning on his sword, as if the enforced control of his passions had unnerved him.

Eberhardt rose slowly.

'Are you a fool?' he asked under his breath.

'Probably. I dislike your character; nevertheless I do not choose to deliberately prevent you from fulfilling yourself.'

'Even though in fulfilling myself I run counter to your ideas of law and order?'

A smile passed over Conrath's face. He was looking down on his wizen adversary like a young archangel victorious over the powers of darkness.

'No one knows how he shall fulfil himself,' he said quietly. 'You may be on the wrong road—retrograding, not progressing; and if I had checked your growth just now, it would not have been for ever. We are bound by natural law to fulfil ourselves; if prematurely cut off here and now, we shall return at a future day to redeem ourselves. Why should I retard your inevitable fate?'

'Yes, I know. You are a day-dreaming fool, masquerading as a philosopher. I have no such scruples; I shall glory in cutting the thread of your life.'

The air was so still that they could hear the shrill swish of the swords, as they flashed in the moonlight like sinister snakes of swift blue fire. Then Conrath felt a sudden thrill of acute pain. For a moment he believed that all was over—that death had come to him in that swift agony—until, as the faintness passed off, he became dreamily conscious that he was lying on a swaying world, staring at a strange, far-away

moon, with the touch of steel at his throat. Then he had not yet faced the last agony? That was still to come—to be borne, as it were, in cold blood. He was not a coward; he felt no fear—only an irresistible hunger of curiosity, like one driven from a banquet before the feast has begun—a longing to know *why* things were thus, and not otherwise.

Eberhardt was bending over him, his gnome-like face distorted, and the curiously curved lips parted with a smile of sinister triumph.

‘I am going to kill you now,’ he murmured in his ear. ‘Have you no fear?’

‘None.’

‘Nor regret?’

‘None.’

‘And fame? knowledge? the good of your fellow-men?’

Just as a dying man at the supreme moment sees, in a vision, his past life spread before him, so before the fainting brain of Conrath rose, like a radiant spirit, the joy and loveliness of the life he was leaving, the interest and wonder of it, its manifold possibilities, concentrated, as it were, in a burst of light; whilst through it, like some

strange, haunting thing of evil, peered the mocking face of Eberhardt. A sudden wild yearning rushed through Conrath's heart.

'A life for a life!' he panted. 'Give me my life.'

Eberhardt stooped over him, until his lips were close to his ear.

'In pledge for what? If I give you life, I will wrench from you fame or love. Which?'

A deadly faintness crept over Conrath. To his weakened brain the man's face had grown weirdly horrible, like a phantom seen in strange dreams.

'Love,' he whispered.

Then he fainted, and knew no more until he woke to find himself carried on a litter through the deserted streets of the town.

II

TWENTY years later Conrath von Hardenfeldt was walking home one night through the tortuous, dimly lit streets of the old university town. He was middle-aged now, his hair prematurely grey, his strongly developed brows and sunken eyes testifying to a career of strenuous thought.

He had made the most of the life given to him by Eberhardt. For a few years he had been filled with a torturing self-loathing; haunted by the memory of that cowardly shrinking, born of one moment of physical weakness. For a time he went through the enervating slackness of despair that comes after the vanishing of youth's illusions. In weak natures this mood of a moment takes all colour out of the rest of life; but with Conrath it was but a gloomy and tangled wood, clothing the foot of clearer heights towards which his soul aspired. Through suffering he gained a wider and more intimate knowledge of the human heart; and,

through generous sympathy with men in the hour of their deepest need, he became 'aware of his life's flow,' and drew near to the source of Beauty.

He prized knowledge less for its own sake than as a powerful agent in influencing others, and Fame came to him as an accident, not as the chief aim in his career.

His home life was solitary. Love, in the form of the Woman Soul, had not come into it. Firstly, because after the shock of the one reckless outburst of his youth he was left with a curious, unreasoning dread of the fulfilment of Eberhardt's bombastic threat. And when, a few years later, he heard of Eberhardt's death, his own life had become so full that there seemed to be no room for any intensely personal affection.

To-night, as he walked leisurely home, a soft drizzle falling refreshingly in his face, he was going over again in his memory the honest applause he had received that night: nothing gave him such joy as when, with winged words, he was able to touch the higher nature in those lawless, impressionable students. His heart yearned to every one of them, as an artist yearns towards each

new work of his hands, as an infinite possibility. Conrath held that every individual soul has in it infinite possibilities, and that only accident and misfortune prevent its perfect growth.

When he reached his house his feet stumbled over something lying against the door. Stooping, he touched it with his hand, then recoiled a little, and, half annoyed at the delay, struck a match. As the feeble light spurted for a second in the wet and darkness, the figure moved with a start, peered into the night, then stretching out its arms, cried tremulously—

‘Master—master! is it you? Oh, how long you have been coming!’

‘Long? You have not been waiting for me?’

‘Oh, I have been waiting for you all my life. And here in the rain for hours. And now—’

‘You should choose better hours,’ interrupted Conrath. ‘I do not know you. This is not the time at which I care to make new acquaintances.’

He pushed open the door, and was on the point of shutting it behind him, when an impulse of pity induced him to look back. A faint light from the lamp in the passage fell on the crouching figure of a girl of about seventeen, her arms still outstretched,

the head drooping forward, and rain drenching the fair hair and delicate limbs.

In a moment Conrath had carried her into his study and laid her gently on the sofa.

‘The poor thing has fainted. What a brute I am !’ he said to himself, as he turned, with a bachelor’s first instinct, to find some brandy and a glass. By the time he had unearthed them from amongst a litter of books, she had opened her eyes, and was gazing like a frightened child at the unfamiliar surroundings.

‘Are you better?’ asked Conrath. ‘But before you tell me anything you must drink this.’

She took a few sips, then spoke wistfully.

‘You won’t send me away?’ she whispered.

Tangled fair hair, falling in tight curls over her forehead, almost hid the delicate straight line of the brows. Her eyes, big and blue and feverishly bright, seemed to demand an answer: and her lips, as she raised the glass to them, were trembling with a child’s passionate distress. She was very lovely; and the ready affirmative answer died on Conrath’s lips.

There was a short silence. Then he came nearer to her, looking down at her with wonder in his face.

'I know you now. You are Isolde Stölze,' he said slowly. 'But I don't understand. You were always naughty; but I don't think I ever remember your doing anything so naughty as this.'

She looked up, encouraged by the kindly tones, and shook her head.

'Ah! I am tired of being naughty,' she said petulantly: 'that's why I came. They wearied me, and hunted me. They *wished* to be rid of me. So I went. I have never been good; but I am not wicked as they are. They sin because they have got no hearts; I am only naughty because my heart is so large it hurts me.' She pressed her hands over her little heaving breasts, and looked into his eyes with the innocent *abandon* of a child. 'What it wants is love; and it has known nothing but hate and mockery.'

Conrath remembered her perfectly. The winter before he had given weekly lectures at a girl's college. Amongst the pupils had been one who used to half-embarrass him with the intensity of her zeal. He was accustomed to hero-worship from his female pupils, and treated it with a gentle humour that robbed it of undue sentiment. But this strange child with her great eager eyes discomfited

him ; he was conscious that she hungered for something more than he could give her. She lived with distant relations who sent her to school to get rid of her, and her views of life were the distorted ones of a clever child neglected in an ill-regulated family.

Something in her seemed to be in spontaneous touch with Conrath's wider vision. She hung on his words, often moved to tears, which she dashed away angrily with her hands ; and, sometimes, stirred for some reason into disagreement, rushing from the classroom in a violent burst of sobs ; but generally sitting motionless, her eyes lovely with childlike delight. Goodness : beauty : love. All the mysterious promptings of her heart rose in answer to these things—so different from what she had known.

As Conrath remembered all this the difficulties of the situation became plain to him. He stood in irresolute perplexity.

‘But why did you come here?’ he asked at last.

‘I came here because you are the only person who makes me feel good and happy. Soon I should have become just like the others ; so I ran away to you. You can teach me to be like you. I can

learn ; I am not stupid. Only try, and you shall be proud of me some day.'

'Poor little thing ! But you must not stay here: it is impossible. To-night I will get my landlady to look after you. But to-morrow—'

She fell on her knees at his feet and caught his hands in hers.

'Oh, don't drive me away !' she cried. 'If you send me back you will be killing me. Yes—it will kill me. My body may live, but my soul will die. Oh, dear, good master, only try me ! I will be no trouble. You shall never have to say you are sorry I came to you.'

He drew his hands away.

'Impossible,' he repeated, touched in spite of himself by her woman's beauty, her woman's need of help and guidance: 'you cannot understand. But I am a bachelor; you and I could not live together, unless— I am twenty years older than you: I might be your father; yet it is impossible for us to live together.'

'Oh, not impossible,' she answered, with a flash of her old passion: 'why not tell the truth, and say you do not want me ?'

'There ! you are yourself again,' he said kindly.

‘And now I will fetch my good landlady and let her take care of you for the night.’

The colour rushed into her face. She said nothing, but sat upright, with tears trickling down her cheeks—too proud to dry them, too forlorn to try and check them.

Conrath stood looking at her. His hands still seemed to feel the impress of her soft fingers. How desolate she was! How tender! How full of promise! Here, too, were infinite possibilities—a castaway soul struggling towards beauty.

He laid his hands on her bowed shoulders, and raised her face.

‘Listen to me,’ he said gently. ‘If you will trust your woman-soul to me, I will give the rest of my life to its service.’

III

ISOLDE stood at the window looking out over the shining darkness of the lake. The embosoming hills, black and sombre at their base, but lightening into deep blueness at their summits, loomed against the sky. The moon had not yet risen; only a slowly spreading radiance behind the distant hills heralded its coming.

The little turret chamber was gaily lit. At one corner Conrath sat at the organ; and the music, full of tranquil joy, seemed to speak of his inward peace and content. Every summer he brought his wife to this far-away retreat on the shore of a mountain lake, where, for two months of well-earned rest, they made life yield them its best of beauty.

The compact so hastily entered into four years before had been amply fulfilled on both sides. Daily, Isolde seemed to be rising higher to meet him; he had awakened her soul, and poured joy into her heart; and, in return, her love had come

to be the very breath of his being. Only through it could he touch her soul, only through it help her to complete herself; and already he seemed to see, in the near future, the perfect creation—the perfect woman, with a man's depth and courage, a woman's tenderness and faith.

A smile parted her lips as she listened to his playing. But suddenly she lifted her finger, and peered out of the window.

'Hush!' she said, in startled voice. 'There it is again. You *must* hear it.'

Conrath opened the window and listened. The cool night air went soundlessly through the pines and over the waters.

'Imagination, my little one,' he said. 'What is it this time? Magic music again?'

'Yes. Wild notes of music, like a song of Brahms' wandering on the wings of the wind. It is not imagination. There! Listen again! Surely—'

'Not a sound. It is a siren-song audible only to your ears.'

She shut the window hastily, and began pacing round the room—a trick of her girlhood that only returned when she was excited.

‘Don’t say that,’ she pleaded: ‘the sound is there. And that’s just it: it draws me like a siren’s song—it is drawing me now. Oh, *do say* you hear it too.’

She ran to the window and flung it wide open. This time the sounds were real enough—the long-drawn plaint of a violin coming from a distance, and growing in poignancy and passion as it drew near.

‘It draws me,’ she repeated, shrinking into his arms. ‘Hold me, Conrath—dear Conrath. It is as if the forests, where I used to play as a child, were calling to me out of the past. I can see the great pines on the hills, like giants against the sky, and hear the torrents rushing from the mountains.’

Conrath held her to him, and touched her hair with his lips.

‘See! the mystery explains itself,’ he said soothingly; ‘it is only some wild boy serenading you.’

Out of the darkness a little boat shot into view. At the helm stood a slim, swaying figure, the maker of the music; and, as he passed beneath the window, he drew a strange, alluring sweetness out of his instrument that thrilled through the night like a magic spell. Then the wilder strain began

again, until it shrilled into silence like a mocking laugh.

Isolde threw her arms round Conrath's neck.

'Oh, how nice it is to be here, safe with you!' she cried. 'How happy we are! There is nothing in the wide world to be desired. . . . How he made it sing, that violin! But it made me sad. To-morrow, if it comes, I will not listen. What I want is *your* music, my master, my dear, dear master.'

She was true to her word. Next night, when the first notes of the wild music stole over the lake, she resolutely turned her eyes from the window. This time it was some wild Hungarian music, the notes rushing upon each other with savage glee, the very essence of a wild and roving life. As the sounds came nearer, she could bear it no longer, and sprang to her feet.

'There!' she cried, dragging Conrath to the organ; 'it is more maddening than ever. It is becoming an impertinence. Play him down—crush him—conquer him! Play, Conrath—quick, quick!'

As the volume of sound, serene and pure, flooded the room, flowing beyond it out into the night,

Isolde stood with one hand on her husband's shoulder, her eyes shining with triumph. The frailer tones of the violin soared up against the fuller harmonies, like a bird beating its wings against a storm, then ceased altogether. There was a crash against the rocks below the turret, and a cry rang through the air. The violin-player, reckless in his excitement, had swayed the boat against the rocks; and when Conrath reached the window, he saw the little craft floating keel upwards, and one of its occupants dragging the other up the slippery rock.

As Conrath hurried down to give assistance he saw Isolde's white-robed figure flit past him, down the spiral staircase and over the rocks, until she stood close to the prostrate figure of the young man.

He was very young—slender and delicate as a boy. Even as he lay there, in the abandonment of exhaustion, his limbs had the lissome grace of a faun. Water trickled from his thick dark curls, and the moonlight blanched his beautiful face and bared throat. His heavy, long-lashed lids were closed, but a curious, sweetly mocking smile played over his delicately cut lips.

Isolde bent down and touched his forehead.

'He is not dead: it is only a faint,' she said softly.

At the sound of her voice he opened his eyes, and murmured something. Conrath just caught the words, and as he did so his heart contracted with sudden anguish—

... '*A love for a life.*' ...

IV

‘HUSH !’ whispered Isolde, her finger on her lips :
‘don’t you see that he is asleep ?’

Loris lay in the shade of a pine-tree, his head thrown back in deep slumber. Even as he slept a faint, enigmatical smile hovered round his mobile lips ; in his cheeks a rich colour glowed under the olive skin ; his bare brown throat heaved with calm and regular breathing ; and in the voluptuous curved eyelids and smooth temples delicate blue veins seemed to show the quick pulsing of his blood.

Isolde sat by him, a heap of vine leaves in her lap. Conrath joined her noiselessly.

‘Sleeping, drinking, loving—so runs his life away,’ he said, nodding towards the young man.
‘What are you doing ?’

She held up a half-finished wreath of vine leaves, and laughed to herself.

‘I am going to crown him as the god of wine. He is just like the engraving in your room.’

‘Yes—a kind of resuscitated Dionysus, who, dressed in a faun skin and crowned with grapes and vine leaves, ought to lie amongst flowers, tossing wine out of a golden cup. Hairy-legged satyrs should wait on him, and Pan blow delicious music for him on an oaten pipe.’ He broke off suddenly. ‘He *is* half an animal, this new friend of yours.’

‘Yes—like some beautiful wild creature of the woods.’

‘Whose sting is poison.’

‘No,’ she said quickly; ‘you do him wrong. *A genius naked, wingless, like a faun without the beasthood.* Look at him,’ she added, laying her wreath lightly on his head, but not so lightly that her fingers did not touch his clustering curls: ‘is he not Goethe’s Euphorion?—

‘Future Master of all beauty, all the melodies eternal
Throbbing in his flesh and blood.’

‘All the melodies of eternal death,’ answered Conrath, ‘but not of the eternal beauty.’

Loris moved, and opened his eyes.

‘Beauty?’ he echoed. ‘Is that what you are discussing? Lost labour! There is but one beauty, and that is plain for all eyes to see.’

Isolde rose, and her glowing eyes wandered over the lake and hills, bathed in noonday sunshine.

‘All that,’ she said comprehensively—‘all that is beautiful. And it fills my heart to overflowing with love of everything high and noble. *Why?*’

‘Because beauty is love and goodness,’ answered Conrath. ‘The Logos is love, and takes form and substance here as beauty.’

Loris laughed, and, leaning on his elbow, turned his vine-wreathed head lazily towards him.

‘Pardon me. You say beauty is love and goodness; you mean love is beauty.’

‘I see no distinction,’ said Conrath coldly.

‘Ah! you prefer your cold academical definitions—bloodless and fleshless,’ Loris answered, with quiet insolence. ‘It being your profession to preach goodness, you try to clothe its skeleton with the attributes of life. Passion, on the contrary, radiates beauty as the sun radiates heat; it is instinct with beauty, because its essence is love, and all love is beauty. Your goodness is love with the life-blood drained from it. You have never known the rapture that makes men as gods. Your dream of beauty is as pale as poor flowers that grow in the shade; the sun has never shone

on it, nor kindled it into radiant colour. And yet you talk of beauty!'

At the end of his speech, spoken with the low, passionate utterance that transformed everything he said into music, he turned his beautiful, evil face to Isolde; and their eyes, drawn by the irresistible tie of youth and passion, seemed to be binding their souls together. Conrath touched Isolde on the arm, and the crimson rushed to her cheeks.

'My wife and I have learned what love is,' he said, with forced calm. 'No one can unteach us. You have talked a great deal about it during the last week: if passion may be communicated by speech, we must be on a fair road to observe the beauty of which you tell us. It is our right to ask on what authority you speak. What experience have you, other than a few years of boyish depravity? What guarantee have you that your love is the beauty that endures?'

Loris leaned forward, his eyes half closed with laughter.

'What pledge have you that *your* love is the love that lives?' he asked, with indolent mockery. And as he spoke—young and beautiful as a wine-

god, with love and mirth rippling in his eyes and on his lips—it seemed to Conrath that for one horrible moment his face was transformed into the satyrlike features of Eberhardt, demanding the fulfilment of a long-forgotten pledge; and he knew that the struggle lay, not with him, but between the powers of good and evil in his wife's soul.

V

Over the moonlit lake the music came soaring, rising and falling, always the same, yet ever changing, mysterious as love and human as passion, unending in the swaying lilt of its rhythm ; calling, calling, calling, night after night, with the wearying persistency of a nightingale in the heart of May. And night after night Isolde had strained her senses to catch its faintest note, and yearned to answer its calling, and known that one night she must needs go down to meet it, and drift away in the little boat to a new and untried world.

All her loyalty, all her gratitude could not hold her back. She had a horror of her fate, and yet she loved it ; it was killing her best and highest nature, yet rather than forgo it she was ready to sacrifice all permanent joy in this world and the next ; and when the fated moment came, and she crept over the rocks, guided by Loris's strong hand, she felt nothing but an unreasoning exultation.

As they glided over the still water, under the glancing stars, she felt, not so much passion, as a kind of all-powerful fate drawing her away into a great darkness. Yet the very darkness seemed to be on fire with something she had never known before. It was life—the pulse of life throbbing beneath her touch; the mystery of things unknown beckoning to her from beyond the limit of her horizon. It was love, joy, splendour, ecstasy.

She put her hand closer in that of Loris.

‘Something has come to me,’ she murmured; ‘it is as if my soul had first awakened. Is it love?’

‘What else *could* it be?’ he whispered.

‘It is love, then—not happiness? Through all the wonder and glory of it a sorrow beyond words is at my heart. What is speaking to me?’

‘I have shown you life, beloved,’ he said. ‘No woman can complete herself without drinking of love’s passion. It is her inexorable fate to develop herself through bitterest sorrow and sacrifice; to sink, that she may rise. You have made your sacrifice, and chosen the better part. Now you shall have joy to the very brim.’

‘This is joy,’ she answered.

Suddenly she raised her head. A sound was

stealing over the water, pure and tender as an early summer dawn, when birds begin to twitter, and yellow light chases away the night. It soothed her like a tired child; her passion, lulled into rest, seemed to grow into something beyond passion—deeper and fuller; the something that was her *own*, not the gift of Loris nor of Conrath. Loris felt her hand flutter in his grasp like an imprisoned butterfly. ‘I begin to understand,’ she whispered; ‘the sorrow at my heart is the sorrow of the world. It is crushing the joy I held. But over and above all is something that tears me from you. Teach me, Loris! I am bewildered—afraid.’

‘First, Knowledge; and next, Renunciation,’ he answered lightly; ‘Renunciation—the safety-valve of worldlings.’

‘Listen! Do you hear? It is Conrath playing. He is calling me. I must go. O Loris! let me go.’

‘Never! What can he give you to equal my gifts?’

‘Nothing,’ she cried, clinging to him. ‘Nothing. I love you. My whole being is yours, now and for ever. And yet I *must* not stay.’

The organ pealed across the lake. Its growing

fulness had the strength of calm. The dawn had flushed into a glorious day.

‘Go, then, if you must,’ he answered, with a mocking laugh. ‘But you are mine for ever. You could not resist me. Though you go back to him, your love is mine; and the best that he shall have will be but the ghost of your woman-soul.’

It was a cold, wet morning, with chilly mists rising from the lake, when Conrath went to open his heart and home once more to his wife. He found her kneeling on the threshold; and as he laid his hands tenderly on her head, she burst into bitter tears. Her crouching form, in its clinging wet garments, humbly kneeling at his feet, and her forlorn weeping, wrung his heart. He felt no anger. He had brought his doom upon himself, and Eberhardt had but claimed his right. For, though she had come back to him, he knew that the woman he had loved, with her widening heart and mind, her growing appreciation of great and noble things, was gone from him. Her presence, her new being, remained with him; but her spirit, heart, soul—the *essence* of her—had gone, for ever, with the lover of a passing hour.





MORISÈD: A SKETCH



MORISÉD

I

SHE came there day after day, week after week, all through the winter and early spring—a small, solitary figure, with something plaintive in the childish face and eyes that made me think of a little brown linnet imprisoned in the narrow street of a city, far from its native green fields and hedgerows.

When first she came, one chilly day in December, I was struck by the atmosphere of freshness and health she brought with her, like the breath of sea-breezes blown into a sunless and stuffy town. One was so used to the ordinary run of visitors to the Louvre that it was a relief to watch the absorbed excitement with which this little country girl feasted upon the beauties of art spread out around her. The first day she came she seemed bewildered with delight. Judging by the astonishment with which she paused in the middle of the

gallery, looking round first on one side, then on the other, one would have said that she had never seen a picture before in her life. But her next action was worthy of any student of Murray or Baedeker. She glanced quickly round the walls, then, having found the number she sought, came straight as a die close to where I was working, and planted herself before Da Vinci's famous portrait of *Monna Lisa*.

It had been one of my amusements for the last three weeks to look out for that inexplicable little weakness of poor human nature, which makes us so mortally afraid of confessing our inability to admire or understand something which, according to the world's verdict, we are expected to fall down before and worship. I had a sneaking satisfaction in spying upon this common failing, and from my position close to *La Gioconda* I had plenty of opportunities. Cook's tourists, artistic young men, enthusiasts of all ages—I knew by their faces what to expect; the little flutter of anticipation, the extravagant interest, then the blank silence of disappointment, and the obtrusively evident mark of approbation pencilled on the margin of the guide-book.

But there was no affectation in the little country girl. When she found herself close to the picture she gave a low exclamation of satisfaction, as though she had at last found something she had been looking for with heart and soul, and that she expected to be all-satisfying.

I waited for the disillusion. It was inevitable, and it came quickly. First, a puzzled scrutiny, as if by fathoming below the surface of the picture she could see what she had hoped to find, then a little sigh of disappointment and self-confessed failure.

It was not likely that an unsophisticated child of the fields should be able to appreciate all the profound wonder of *La Gioconda*. How should she? The fascinations of *Monna Lisa* appeal not to the senses, but to the intellect and imagination. Hers is not the voluptuous charm of soft cheeks and shining eyes. 'It is a beauty wrought from within upon the flesh. Beauty into which the soul with all its maladies has passed.' How could it touch any responsive chord in the ignorant heart of a child who did not know of the existence of such incongruities as 'maladies of the soul,' and who, like the healthy-minded Pagans of old, looked

upon Beauty as an unmixed element of joy and loveliness?

For the next fortnight, whenever I came to the Louvre I saw the girl gravely studying the pictures, first in one gallery, then in another; but always, before she went away, she came and looked for a few moments at *La Gioconda*, with the same puzzled dissent in her face that I had noticed before. Being an art-student myself, I was generally there two or three times a week copying, and it was partly a mild curiosity in the little stranger that made me choose for my next subject the picture she came so regularly to study. But I was not a little surprised one day when she arrived carrying canvas, brushes, colours, and settled herself, in the most business-like manner, in a vacant place opposite *La Gioconda*, with the evident intention of trying her 'prentice hand on nothing less than one of the finest pictures in the world.

An old woman accompanied her, wearing the quaintest of high white caps, like a square sugar-bag, and a bright-coloured petticoat that made her a conspicuous object, decidedly out of place in so civilised a portion of the globe as Paris. She had assumed an air of studied contempt, as she

scanned, with scathing eyes, the picture her charge had selected for her work.

‘So!’ she ejaculated at last: ‘this is what we have come all the way to Paris to see? It was not worth the trouble.’

‘Perhaps it is because we do not understand, Annaik,’ replied the girl. ‘He told me it was a test of one’s love of Art and Beauty. But it is true that there are many other pictures here that I like much, much better. There are some by a painter called Andrea del Sarto, who came from Italy: even you will say it was worth coming to see them. He has painted the Holy Virgin like an angel from Paradise, so real that one would say she was alive. It was from Italy that all the great painters came.’

Annaik tossed her head. ‘Bah! I dare say Italy is no better than Brittany, if it comes to that. If these artists want beauty let them come to Cornouaille, or the Pays de Vannes, and they will find enough to keep them busy till the good time comes for them to go to Paradise,’ she grumbled. ‘Here in Paris there is as much beauty as in a Reliquary; and for my part, I would as soon sit amongst dead bones as fight my way in

such a crowd as one finds in these streets that stretch on and on into eternity, without a breath of fresh air or sunlight from end to end.'

The girl nodded her head.

'Yes, there is not much sunlight. But there are these wonderful pictures, and all the work of man's intellect and heart, Annaik. It must be more beautiful than a country life that is the same day after day, and where no one cares for anything but the harvests and the fishing seasons?'

'That may be. But if you like to sit here all day painting a face with evil eyes like the Korrigan, may the Virgin protect you, Morisèd. It is a snare of the wicked one for men's souls, that's what I say.'

'Then the sooner you fly from it the better. Good-bye, Annaik. Don't forget to come for me this afternoon.'

'Well, well. *Dieu te bénisse, Morisèd.* You've need of a blessing here amongst all these painted images,' said Annaik, with a last sniff of disapprobation as she turned her back on the condemned *Monna Lisa*, against whose mysterious gaze she felt half inclined to make the sign of the cross to guard herself from the evil eye.

Things were making themselves clear to me. Her name was Morisèd: she had left the wilds of Brittany to seek the Beautiful amongst the refinements of Paris. Good luck to her in the pursuit. Is it not to be found in the dreamful mystification of Leonardo, the tender perfection of Raphael, the rich life of Giorgione? Or is it something more than a poetic dream that assigns it to the Spirit of the Universe, to the omnipresent, eternal life in sea and forest, and the ever-varying play of light and shadow over heaven-touched hills and wide moorland?

Who shall decide in the case of Art *v.* Nature, in a century like ours? Not a little country-girl suddenly transported into the galleries of the Louvre: a little field-flower sent to languish in a hot-house amongst rare and luscious exotics.

I soon saw that Morisèd would not make her fortune as a copyist. She toiled away with praiseworthy assiduity; but though she certainly had some talent, it was the rank, untaught talent that, under a vivid surface-likeness, constructs a purely ideal anatomy in which the 'human form divine' loses half its bone and all its muscle. It was not for her to unravel the mystery of those sphinx-like

eyes and lips. Time after time she blundered and repainted. It would not come. At last, one day, she flung down her brush with a gesture of despair, and catching my eyes fixed upon her with interested sympathy, exclaimed suddenly, with smothered anger, 'Ah! is she not abominable?'

'She is impossible,' I answered, glad of an excuse to speak. 'I have tried her myself, and been miserably baffled. Why do you not leave her?'

'They told me all beauty was expressed in her. I did not see it: I could not understand it,' she said, looking wistfully at the picture. 'You know I want to be an artist. I thought nothing could help me more than to learn every line of her face by heart, so I have tried, and tried, and tried to copy it. But it is impossible. Her eyes seem to go through me. They haunt me. I want to understand them, and yet I am afraid of what they will teach. It frightens me to think that perhaps some day I shall know their meaning, and never be able to forget it. Do *you* understand?'

'Not quite. Like you, I am afraid of the knowledge. But, if you will let me advise you, I think I can show you pictures that will help you more than this.'

‘Oh, thank you, monsieur. Are you an artist?’

‘I am an artisan—a mechanic. That is, I copy pictures for my bread-and-butter. And you? You are not a Parisienne?’

‘No,’ she said triumphantly; ‘I am a Bretonne.’

Had she said Empress of All the Russias she could not have spoken with greater pride and dignity. I felt almost ashamed of being merely Parisian, in presence of such superiority.

‘Ah, I do not know Brittany,’ I answered; ‘but I have heard of its charms. Are you as fond of it as all Bretons are said to be?’

‘I love it. I adore it,’ she said passionately.

‘Why did you leave it?’ I asked, after a pause.

‘I will tell you,’ she said confidentially, nodding her head with a sort of restrained eagerness. ‘I have a friend,’—she blushed a little, then went on—‘I have a friend who taught me what a dreary thing life would be without books, and art, and beauty. Before that I knew nothing and no one, except the peasants, and after I had read,—you do not know how I read, monsieur; sometimes all through the summer nights until the sunrise—after that they could no longer be my companions. There was no one who could talk to

me or understand. And he said I ought to be an artist, and that I had a talent for drawing. At home there are no books, nor beautiful things like there are in the great world. So I have come here to work, and learn, and live a larger life.'

'You left Brittany to look for Beauty, as you call it, in Paris? Do you really think it is more likely to be found here?'

She looked at me with startled wonder, as if the question were new to her, and full of vague possibilities of future disappointments and regrets. I did not wish to hurry on the inevitable disillusion, so changing the subject I asked her if she could show me any original drawings.

'Oh yes. I always keep some with me to show him—I mean, to show any one who might ask me. It is not very easy to get on in this great big Paris without help. But no one has spoken to me until to-day. There! Will you tell me the truth, monsieur? Do you think I shall ever be an artist?'

She had opened a large portfolio, and tumbled out a number of drawings and sketches at my feet, eagerly watching my face as I examined them. They were clever, decidedly clever, for one who had

had little or no training. In certain bits of landscape there was an insight and fidelity that spoke volumes of the unconscious communion with Nature which, until now, had made up to her for lack of human friendship. But she was not destined to be an artist.

I made a few hurried remarks on this sketch and that, to avoid answering her question, feeling all the while that those eager dark eyes had read my reply, and that humbug was waste of breath. Her face fell, and though she spoke bravely, there was a little quiver in her voice.

‘You do not think so?’ she said quietly. ‘I see it in your face. I think I have known it, too, ever since I first came to the Louvre, only I have not confessed it to myself.’

‘You will not give it up, mademoiselle? You have talent; and it is so few of us who can rise to the first rank.’

‘No, I will not give it up yet. I have a friend in Paris,—she blushed again at this,—‘I will wait until he comes back.’

So Beauty was not the only thing Morisèd had come to Paris to seek. Would the other object of her search be more attainable? I doubted it. It

transpired, in the course of our conversations, that 'the friend' who was to have helped her had left Paris, to return 'some day,' a day of great and glorious portent to Morisèd. I knew better than she did the date of such 'some day's.'

I left Paris for some weeks in the spring, having alienated Morisèd from *La Gioconda* and set her to work on charcoal copies of less complicated subjects.

When I returned from my holiday I found her still patiently plodding away. But 'hope deferred' had told on her. She had lost her freshness and grown thin and pale, with the wistfulness in her eyes intensified into actual longing and homesickness, as if the sedentary monotony of town life were taking her youth out of her, physically and mentally.

I reproached her for her wan looks, recommending her to leave her work, and spend the bright spring days in the Bois de Boulogne with her old duenna. It might be a poor substitute for that marvellous 'Bas Bretagne' of hers; but still there were trees bursting into bud, and warm sunshine tinting the delicate green of young leaves.

'No, no; I cannot, I dare not,' she said listlessly. 'It would be too much for me. Now, in the spring

weather—when I know what it is like at home, in Cornouaille—I should feel I must go back to see it all once more.'

'And why not?' I could not help saying. 'What is there to keep you here? I should go if I were you.'

'I must wait,' she answered resolutely; 'I must wait—'

She broke off suddenly, with a little catch in her breath that was almost like a sob of delight.

Her eyes, which had been roaming restlessly over the crowded gallery, were fixed on some object not far from where we stood. Her whole face and attitude were full of radiant expectation and hope fulfilled. Her 'friend' had come for her at last.

I knew what the end would be, simply because I knew Gervaise Dreyfus. And yet, seeing that eager little face with its passionate eyes hanging upon his movements, for a moment I hoped that for once I might be mistaken in him, and I drew back that the meeting might be between those two alone.

He came straight towards her with that light-hearted 'conquering and to conquer' air of his; came and passed her by without a glance of

recognition, absolutely and deliberately shattering a dream that he had himself nursed and fanned into existence.

It was all over in a few minutes; and then through the long gallery, with its throng of sight-seers, rang a girl's voice broken with sobs—

‘Gervaise, Gervaise! Have you forgotten me?’

II

FROM a little Breton church the Angelus was chiming, clear and resonant, over the yellow corn-fields. On the deep glow of a luminous sky the harvest moon hung its slender red-tinged bow, and against this quietly shining autumn twilight rose a sharply curved hillock, along which a troop of gleaners were walking, their stalwart forms cut out in bold relief, and their gay costumes making a glow of colour against the dark-blue sky.

A girl of seventeen, perched on the top of a rude Celtic stone, with her feet propped on a lower one, was the only observer of the little scene. A large sheet of coarse paper rested on her knees, over which she bent her head with an appearance of most eager interest. By her side was some dirty water in a chipped cup, and a box of common water-colours, with which she was painting with a feverish haste that, if rapidity makes a master,

argued her an artist of the first mark. She did not look quite like a peasant. Her white linen chemisette covered a soft fair neck, and arms that still showed the thin angularities of girlhood; and the coarse, blue-green skirt was short and plain enough to show that her limbs were small and delicate, without the muscular wiriness common to the native peasant.

She was very intent on her work, dashing in bright reds and crude greens with happy indifference to the laws of chiaroscuro, and far too much absorbed in her ambitious efforts to notice that a man, in priest's cassock, had quietly joined her and, with a smile of half-pitying indulgence, was looking over her shoulder at her orange sunset, and the confused, shapeless figures of her reapers.

Presently he laid his hand on her shoulder; and turning round with a start, she put both hands over her painting with guilty shyness.

‘I have been trying to paint, uncle. But you must not look,’ she said apologetically. ‘It is execrable. Every minute the light changes; the sky is never the same for two minutes—never. I have been painting as fast as I can; but it is not possible to catch the colours of the sunset. A

short time ago the west was like the *Gloire de Dijon* in front of my windows, and now, only look, it is grey and silvery; there is no colour anywhere. What can one do?’

‘And the peasants?’ said the priest. ‘Has Marrianic got an arm that length? It is no wonder they say she works well at the harvest.’

Morisèd looked a little ruefully at her despised painting, but not without the secret hope, felt by all amateurs, that somewhere in the daubs might be discovered a stroke of genius.

‘Is it so very bad, uncle? You see I had to do it quickly. It might have been better, if I had had more time.’

‘It could never have been worth comparison with the actual scene,’ answered the priest, not very graciously. ‘The finest work of art is only a vain imitation of Nature.’

The girl gave a little sigh, and, climbing down from her perch, gathered together her paints and brushes.

‘But you are not angry?’ she asked, still glancing with secret fondness at her sketch. ‘You know, my uncle, Monsieur Gervaise told me that perhaps, if I work very hard, some day I may be

able to paint as he does. You would not mind then? Not if I become a real artist?'

'Monsieur Gervaise fills your head with false ideas,' said the priest coldly. 'What is this beauty you hunger after, compared with the beauty of self-sacrifice, of sanctity, of redeeming other souls from darkness to something higher than the graven images that are mere symbols of the hollow delights of the world?'

They had left the corn-field, and as he walked with long rapid strides down the stone-paved *fossé* leading to the village, the girl had to quicken her steps almost to a run to keep pace with him. She knew it to be a sign of mental excitement with him. The subject was one which, though they seldom discussed it, had stolen in between them of late, and set them morally at war with each other. He was a priest; what could he know or understand of the life other men and women longed and cared for? There were other things in the world besides prayer and fasting, self-denial and sanctity, things of which he, in his grave asceticism, could form no conception, but which Morisèd had already begun to dream about and covet.

Since her earliest childhood, Monsieur le Recteur

of Avvalek, a remote village in Brittany, had set himself the task of bringing up his orphan niece, Morisèd, to be a priest's ideal woman—a saint, pure, self-denying, charitable, devout, with only enough of the human being in her to give her a ready sympathy with the ills of her fellow-creatures. Morisèd seemed peculiarly fitted for such a vocation. She was gentle, tender-hearted, unselfish, wrapped up in the small, monotonous interests of the peasantry, with whom she lived almost as one of themselves, only raised above them by right of her connection with the Recteur, and by a certain undefinable superiority of mind and manners.

But if M. le Recteur taught her to be good, he could not teach her to be austere. He could not prevent her from revelling in sunshine and flowers, in the beauties of her Breton home, with its golden corn-fields, its gorse-covered *landes*, and savage sea-coasts. She was born with the rare, keen sense of beauty that no power on earth can stifle—a sense that, though it was distinctly worldly, had, for want of other outlets, lent its ardour to the pure and religious ideals held up before her by her uncle.

Nothing was wanting to make her happy. And so, it being a universal law that no sooner is happi-

ness found than it flees, a new element must needs come into her existence—a young, bright, most unspiritual element, that brought with it an insight into all that her uncle had withheld from her—Art, Intellect, Love, Beauty. The bearer of these good things was a young artist from Paris. He had taken lodgings for the summer in Mère Barbaik's house, whose garden joined on to the gay little patch where Morisèd Morel grew and tended her rose-trees, and it was not likely that a three-foot hedge would long keep Gervaise Dreyfus separated from anything so young and pretty, and so well worthy of an artist's attention as the little Breton girl. Before the end of the week Morisèd had undertaken to show him the prettiest views in the neighbourhood, in exchange for which he promised to teach her the secrets of his Art, and did his best to relieve her mind of some of its ignorance by talking to her about books and countries of which she had never even heard. It seemed to Morisèd that until now she had been but half alive, the better part of her nature wrapt in heavy sleep, and only now awakening to the true interests of life. Her uncle had done his best to crush the instincts of the student and artist that were inborn

in her, bound to assert themselves on the very first encouragement. Fifteen years of repressive narrowness were powerless against such a coincidence as the advent in her life of a man like Gervaise Dreyfus.

He had come to Brittany to study landscape. But he soon discovered that he was dreadfully bored by beauty in Nature, and that his talents confined themselves to the Human form divine as seen, shaped by Parisian dressmakers, in the gay streets of Paris. It required great strength of mind to remain two whole months at such a dead-alive place as Avvalek, and it is to be doubted whether he would have submitted to it, if he had not found a task, thoroughly congenial to him, in enlarging Morisèd's unsophisticated mind and developing her latent artistic tastes.

One day she brought him a heap of papers, flying away from him before he had time to question her as to what they were. They turned out to be a quantity of drawings—chiefly copied from mystical illustrations of such religious lore as she was allowed to read, with a few rude attempts at studies from Nature. Evidently she had a natural turn for drawing, and an eye for colour, and

Gervaise jumped to the conclusion that he had discovered an untaught genius whom it would be well worth his while to cultivate.

So it happened that Morisèd's ideal was no longer to be a Sister of Mercy, but a famous artist whose life should be given up to a search after beauty instead of devoted to the service of humanity. With Gervaise for tutor, she worked like a slave at her painting and books. She dreamed vaguely of Rome and Paris, but still found her daily interests in the cottages of the peasants and sailors, helping her uncle in his work as if there was no world worth speaking of beyond the boundaries of her beloved Brittany. For two years after his first visit to Avvalem Gervaise Dreyfus kept her supplied with books, which she pored over at night, by moonlight in summer, or when the first rays of dawn brought a gleam of light into her room at early morning; whilst every spare moment in the day was given to drawing and painting on the lines pointed out to her by Gervaise.

Thus when, two years later, he came again to see how his little pupil was progressing, he found that she had completely raised herself above the ignorant peasant-girl she had been when he first

saw her. She was not going to be a Rosa Bonheur. She had talent, but no genius; vague and passionate aspirations without a possibility of seeing them realised. Her love of beauty in any and every form had become a second religion; there was something touching in the intensity of her enthusiasm, in her craving for a larger sphere where she might develop all the artistic and intellectual capabilities that in some dim way were spoiling for her the old, happy life, when an unthinking fervour joined to an equally unthinking appreciation of natural beauties, and a keen interest in the humdrum little human world around her, had made up the sum of her delights. Now, a little knowledge implanted and fostered by one who talked grandiloquently of the glory of Intellect, and the triumphs of Mind over Matter, had stolen from her the freshness of a healthy ignorance, and given her the germs of that restless wonder and yearning which is one of the morbid signs of modern civilisation.

Gervaise had not meant to stay long in Avvalek a second time. But somehow it was not easy to say good-bye to Morisèd. She had grown very pretty, and her enthusiasm made her interesting.

When she told him wild Breton legends, or chanted her old weird songs and ballads, he thought her charming; and as he happened to be heart-free at the moment, it was the easiest thing in the world to let friendship drift towards courtship.

As for Morisèd, her mind was more than ever filled with dreams of Rome and Paris, with their wonderful works of art, their wonderful intellectual life; Gervaise told her that it was in such things only that the highest beauty could be found, not in lonely seashores and the melancholy loveliness of Breton scenery; and it seemed to her that if she could but find her way into the great world, all she longed for would be there, waiting for her to stretch out her hand to take it.

Thus it was that M. le Recteur's admonitions fell on deaf ears. In all else she would bow to his wisdom and goodness. But on the subject of beauty and love—no. Had he not voluntarily cast such things from him years ago, before she was born? Perhaps he was less ignorant than she imagined. Perhaps, as they walked home that summer evening along the narrow stone-paved lane, he understood better than she did that his endeavours had been in vain, and that nothing now

could root out from her nature that passionate love of beauty bequeathed to her by her mother.

He did not expostulate with her again, and neither spoke until they were nearly home. Their little house stood at one end of the small straggling village, and half-way down the ill-paved street M. le Recteur paused before a poverty-stricken, one-windowed cottage or cabin, and laid his hand on the girl's shoulder. She was looking down the street to where she could see Gervaise Dreyfus leaning over the wooden pailings of Mère Barbaik's garden. He was going away next day, and she much wished to speak with him again before he went.

'Old Mathurin is worse to-day, they tell me,' began her uncle slowly. 'I must go in and speak to him. I shall not be home until late: do not wait supper for me.'

His voice was grave and full of meaning. Generally she was ready enough to go with him; but just now her heart failed her. The old familiar scene—Nona's endless account of her Mathurin's illness, the gossip about the neighbours, the comfortless interior, with its dirt and squalor—all this suddenly flashed across her mind, not to be borne

now only, but for ever, all her youth, her womanhood, her old age—a life narrow and sordid, without one human being who could speak to her of the things she loved.

Her eyes fell, and without another word her uncle released her, standing for a moment to watch her as she hurried on to meet her friend.

The young man opened the gate, and called to her to join him. If there was something of patronage in his words, it was condoned by the pleasant tone of his voice and the kindest of blue eyes, so that Morisèd obeyed, feeling as if the favour were all on her side.

‘I was afraid you were going with M. le Recteur,’ began Gervaise, ‘and I wanted to have a little talk with you. What have we here?’ he added, drawing the sketch from under her arm, and spreading it out on his knees with an air of serious criticism. ‘Ah! very good—very good indeed. You have really made extraordinary progress, Morisèd. You will not give it all up, after I have gone?’

‘I cannot tell,’ she answered, shaking her head despondently. ‘No one here cares for it. My uncle says it is wrong—the greatest of follies.

Perhaps it would have been better if you had never taught me anything about it.'

'It would have made no difference: it is in your nature, my little Morisèd. Why, see here. Did you ever see such an abnormally large 'beauty bump' on any hand before? I never did.'

She was blushing a little, but did not try to remove her hand. 'Will you ever come back, Monsieur Gervaise?' she asked rather wistfully.

'Of course I will,' he exclaimed cheerily; 'why, I mean to come back and marry you. You know that as well as I. . . . Unless you come to Paris—better still. What do you say to that, Morisèd?'

She did not *say* anything, but her eyes spoke for her, and what they said emboldened Gervaise to kiss her.

Such was the story Gervaise Dreyfus told of his friendship with Morisèd. By the time it was finished he had worked himself into quite a fresh access of love; but he was too selfish, too volatile, to like the idea of being encumbered with a wife.

'Some day, of course!' he said, 'but not yet. Morisèd was happy enough in Brittany. Why

could not she wait there till I am ready to fetch her?’

‘It is your fault!’ I answered. ‘You have spoiled her for her old pleasures. How can you expect her to feel satisfied with a life spent amongst the most illiterate of hard-working peasants, after you have gone out of your way to awake her mind to the highest intellectual interests? She would die for want of sympathy.’

‘Not she. Women are born to lead small lives,’ said Gervaise carelessly; ‘I have enlivened two years of a most monotonous existence. If she will only be patient.’

‘Where? In Brittany, starving her mind? Or in Paris, forlorn and home-sick? You want her to wait until she has lost youth and good-looks, and you have grown tired of her. It is a most noble scheme. I congratulate you upon it.’

‘What a brute I am!’ cried Gervaise, with a sudden revulsion of feeling. ‘Come, Robert. Let’s go to her. I will make it all right with her. We will talk it over with her and see what happens. Perhaps she will have seen the folly of it all by this time. If not—well! after all, she is delicious, with her old-world gravity and enthusiasm; there

is a freshness about it that does one good. I did not mean to do her any harm. It was all in her before, I only happened to stir it to life. But don't let us waste time,' he added, springing up; 'I am quite longing to see her again, to make up to her for my brutality yesterday.'

In the course of my conversation with Morisèd I had learned where she and her old nurse lived, and was able to take Gervaise there as soon as he liked. We guessed that she would be at home: do not women always weep out their troubles in their own rooms?

We were right in our conjecture. When we had mounted half-way up the narrow wooden stairs of a poor lodging-house in an out-of-the-way street of the Quartier Latin, we found the door of her room open, so that we could see into it, and take in her surroundings before she knew of our coming. It was a bare and comfortless place enough, destitute of everything but actual necessities, except that the table in the middle of the room was strewn with books and drawings, touchingly suggestive of the girl's strenuous efforts to force on her own intellectual and artistic development. The old Breton servant sat knitting in a corner, pausing

now and again to look at her young mistress with a distressed shake of the head. The one window was flung open to its utmost : near to it sat Morisèd, gazing dreamily at a sketch lying before her on an easel. It represented some labourers crossing a corn-field, and in the background a crimson sun setting over low distant hills. The workmanship was crude in the extreme ; yet there was a nameless charm about it that carried one's thoughts to fresh fields and sea-breezes ; it spoke to her of Brittany, and so she loved it. She was chanting some curious old song in a low, droning, minor key. Gervaise signed to me to listen.

‘ J'avais oui chanter un oiseau qui chantait si bien, si doucement !

Dors donc, mon enfant, mon enfant : dors donc, enfant, dors.

Qui chantait si bien, si doucement, plus doucement que l'eau qui coule.

Dors donc, mon enfant, mon enfant ; dors donc, enfant, dors.’

Gervaise made a step forward : for the moment his face was full of generosity and pity : the well-known song had recalled memories that could not be hurriedly thrust aside.

‘Morisèd, my little friend,’ he said suddenly: ‘are you not going to welcome me?’

At the sound of his voice she sprang to her feet, a flush of delight spreading over her pale face, and the next moment she was in his outstretched arms, sobbing out—

‘I *knew* you would come, Gervaise. I *knew* it must have been a mistake.’

III

A YEAR has passed since then; and still Gervaise Dreyfus and Morisèd Morel remain unmarried. Month after month Gervaise has put off the fatal event with one weak excuse after another; and month after month Morisèd has accepted his decree with a dogged patience that has in it something of suppressed passion. She has been working steadily to raise herself to his level, burning the midnight oil over her books like any scholar, always with the hope before her that some day she would understand what he had meant by all he had told her about that ever-fleeting Beauty. If it came to her in no other way, womanlike she believed that it would come to her with his love,—most vain and impotent conclusion of all. Gervaise's love was much too selfish a feeling to deserve such confidence: it was good enough for all ordinary purposes, but he was too philosophical to dream of letting it interfere in any way with his freedom

and happiness. He honestly meant to marry her when he could find no more excuses for putting it off; in the meantime it never struck him that by gradually destroying all Morisèd's faith in him he was making future happiness and sympathy impossible between them.

Already, about spring-time, I noticed a change in her. There was something half defiant, half distrustful in her manner, as if she suspected every one of wishing to conceal something from her, which was the natural result of a puritanical innocence brought suddenly into a world where every instinct of refinement seemed to be rooted out of society, and where laxity of thought in both religion and morals came face to face with her on every side.

She still came now and again to copy in the Louvre: she could not quite give up the old dream that some day she might be an artist. But she worked without spirit, continually leaving her place and wandering restlessly through the galleries, seeking out every picture that could possibly recall country scenes to her, and showing in every line of her face a disdainful want of satisfaction with painted imitations of the inimitable.

‘We don’t have sea and rocks like *that* in Brittany,’ she remarked drily, when I found her one day gazing at the blue prettiness of a Claude.

‘But it is not meant for Brittany,’ I said, feeling that I must stand up for Art. ‘Perhaps Nature is like that in Italy—blue skies, blue seas, and perpetual light.’

‘I do not believe in Italy,’ said the girl slowly. ‘They told me all those wonderful things about Paris, too. But it is not true. There is no beauty here—not in art, not in life, not in anything,—and it is even worse than that. It makes it impossible to find it anywhere else, even if it is there—impossible even to dream about it, because one knows that the spirit of it has been taken out of oneself.’

‘Come, not so bad as that. You must not let yourself become morbid,’ I remonstrated. ‘Some people find it, I suppose.’

‘Not if they look for it in the world. See, monsieur, I will make it plain to you. When I lived at home, I had my hills and my valleys and my woods and my sea, and I believed in goodness and love. But now it is different. One must have more than Nature—more than dreams. If I go

back to Brittany I shall have only part of myself to give to Nature; the rest of me will be longing for other things, for knowledge and love such as they told me I should find here, and which I cannot find because they do not exist. It is all quite clear to me now.'

She spoke with quiet conviction, slowly beating the palm of one hand with her fingers, as if to add force to her words. She looked deplorably ill. It was easy to see that she was suffering from one of the most irresistible of mental maladies—home-sickness,—a malady that for her was incurable. As she had said, were she to go back now to the old, unthinking, peaceful life, mind and heart would starve for want of human sympathy. The best advice I could have given her would have been to give up preserving such a useless thing as a heart altogether; but as I knew such advice would not be followed, I suggested instead that we should give up work for to-day and try to get some fresh air. On the way out we passed *La Gioconda*. Morisèd glanced up at the picture for a moment, then turned to me.

'I understand her now,' she said; 'but I do not like her any better. I hate her.'

When Morisèd showed Breton prejudice, Breton temper, it was no use arguing with her. Gervaise ought to have tamed her more before he rashly promised to make her his wife. I hoped for his sake that she would never say she hated him with the same decision with which she had condemned *Monna Lisa*.

When we went out into the street, I ventured to ask if the marriage was still coming off next month, and, to my surprise, she answered in the affirmative.

‘That is good news,’ I said, wondering that she took it so calmly. ‘Perhaps Gervaise will take you to Brittany for your wedding-tour. You ought to go and see your uncle.’

‘Gervaise does not like the country. He says he is never happy away from Paris,’ answered Morisèd. ‘And besides that, it would be so great an expense.’

‘Well, you will have the pleasure of making your new home comfortable. Newly married couples are happy wherever they are.’

She made no answer, but hurried on, her eyes fixed in front of her, yet seeing nothing.

Suddenly she came to a standstill, and faced me with a strange look of fear and appeal.

'I do not understand myself,' she whispered, 'I am so weak; I am afraid of myself. You know how I have longed for it. Yet, now that it is so close, and he makes no more reasons to put it off, I am terrified—terrified. I do not feel as if my love were great enough to bear the dulness and monotony of it all. The great, great dulness—and so little love to make up for it.'

'I know what you mean,' I answered, rather taken aback at being made the recipient of such confidences. 'But you ought not to say such things. It is unfair to Gervaise.'

'I know, I know. He is very kind. But it will be so different for him,' she went on, heedless of my reproof. 'He will still have his outside life, his outside interests—all he wishes for; whilst I shall be at home alone, getting the meals ready—stifling for want of air.'

She broke off, laughing at her own complaints, but tears were not very far below the surface; and though we turned the matter into a joke, I could not forget what she had said.

It is folly to marry at all, but if once the step is decided on, the sooner it is over the better. That year of waiting had chilled Morisèd—taken the

zest out of her hopes for ever. Gervaise, now that the time had come, found it pleasanter than he had expected. After all, he need give up none of his former amusements, and it would be very comfortable to have a dear little thing waiting for him at home, to be loved when he had time to spare for her. What more could she want from him than that?

So the days flew past, until we were within a week of the wedding. I had not seen Morisèd lately, and the recollection of our last conversation together made me vaguely uneasy. I tried one day when Gervaise was talking to me of his coming marriage to persuade him to take her to Brittany. But he let me see that he had no intention of pandering to Morisèd's little 'prejudices,' as he called them.

'If once she goes back she will be more homesick than ever,' he objected. 'She will soon get over it if we leave her alone. I foresee that she will make a model wife. She is too proud to make a fuss over trifles, and if she lets me have my own way a little we shall be as happy as possible.'

'I expect you will want your own way more than a *little*,' I said ironically. 'But you speak

like a philosopher, my friend. You have found out the true secret of living—*Fais ce que je veux*—and one must admit that you carry it out to perfection.'

Gervaise laughed good-temperedly, as he always did if one tried to be disagreeable to him; but as he was bored with me whenever I began to moralise on the subject of his marriage, he soon left me for more sympathetic company, leaving me to congratulate myself that I had left love and marriage behind me at least fifteen years ago.

Outside there was a dull drizzle of rain, blurring the windows, and turning the streets into one long wet puddle. It was not the day to expect friends. But presently there came a low knock at the door, shy and timid; and before I had left off wondering who my lady visitor could be, Morisèd stood by my side. She was very pale, the rain had soaked her little blue serge frock; and though the day was sultry, the hand she held out to me was cold as marble. She carried a portfolio, and one or two books which she laid on the table beside me.

'I have brought these to you,' she began gently. 'You once said they interested you. And also one or two of the drawings you have praised; I should

like you to have them. You have been very kind to me.'

'Thank you. Of course I like to have them,' I answered, pretending to notice nothing else. 'How wet you are, Morisèd. Let me give you a cup of coffee to warm you.'

'No, thank you, monsieur. I am in a hurry, I must not stay. I only came to say good-bye to you, and to thank you.'

'Good-bye?' I echoed. 'It need not be that. I shall see you again as Madame Dreyfus.'

She did not answer at once, but moved to the door, and opened it before she spoke, perhaps to show me that no remonstrances of mine could change her. But she need not have feared. There was something in the steadfast eyes and mouth that showed that she had made her choice once and for all.

'I shall never be Madame Dreyfus,' she said quietly, with just the faintest quiver of the lips. 'I am going back to Brittany.'



MISS ANNE: A SKETCH



MISS ANNE

I

THERE was not a cloud in the scorching blue sky, not a breath of wind stirring the silent sea or rustling the summer foliage of the trees and shrubs in the garden ; the tall, slim eucalyptus reared its weeping head towards the sun, and dreamt of a southern land and sky ; and in its chequered shade, gazing up through its long tapering leaves at the hot and blazing heaven, sat a little old maid, dreaming too of the warmth and sunshine and joy of the dead land of the past.

Not that Miss Anne was really old—not more than thirty-eight at the most,—nor were romance and love dead to her, for it was upon such dainty fare that she had fed and nourished her soul, and allowed it to intoxicate itself through the long and lonely winter months of her solitude.

But the insignia of old maid were indelibly

impressed upon her. There was something faded and patient about her whole appearance, as of one who had *waited*, not *lived*, through those ten best years of a woman's life; something precise in the very way she sat, so straight and motionless, with her small narrow figure, and head rather drooping, that made one feel that hers was a little life of conventionalities, and that her daily habits were also precise and well-regulated, as only those of one leading a perfectly solitary and self-centred existence can be.

Poor little Miss Anne! She must have been so pretty, once upon a time, with blush-rose cheeks and dimples, and soft confiding eyes. But when a woman waits and waits and waits through ten long years, blush-rose cheeks lose their dewy freshness, and dimpled cheeks their roundness, and bright eyes grow a little tired and dimmed. For you cannot nourish the heart on such meagre fare as dreams of romance and love; *life* only can quicken the blood and keep roses and roundness and brightness in cheeks and eyes.

Ten years! Her waiting was just as old as the eucalyptus-tree. Her longing and hope had grown and flourished with its growth, kept a certain

greenness and youth throughout the dreariness of those years, just as the tree sprang fair and graceful amid its bleak surroundings, under a cold northern sky. She remembered how, when they planted it there—stopping very often in their work to look and smile and blush at each other—he had quoted Heine's little song about the lonely fir-tree dreaming, on its snowy height, of a southern palm far away in the land of the morning, and how she had told herself that henceforth she should be like that bleak fir-tree, dreaming of *him* in the flowery tropical world where they had first met and learned to love each other.

But he would come back to her. 'As fast as the eucalyptus grows,' he had said, when they planted the little shoot that so soon grew into a tall shapely tree, 'so fast you may know that my love is growing. Like it, my love will become stronger and higher, and more worthy of you, every hour that we are parted.'

These then were the two romances over which Miss Anne used to dream under the eucalyptus-tree in the garden, when to all appearance there was only a dried-up little old maid sedately knitting stockings or crocheting shawls for a Working Guild.

Two romances: one the romance of the past; the other the romance of the future, whose *motif* was summed up in the words, 'John is coming back again.'

Anne O'Brien was the only child of a widower of crusty temper and roving habits. She was born and bred in Tasmania, where her father held a Government appointment, and the first twenty-five years of her life were spent there, or amongst the neighbouring islands. It was during an expedition to the South Sea Islands that she and John Mordaunt found out the great secret—so new and so wonderful to each boy and girl, in turn, who finds it, though in itself as old as the hills, and with just as little variety in its composition.

In that glorious tropical land love seemed to be born at the very first glance of eloquent eyes, the first sympathetic words between two young creatures who were both revelling in the joy and freshness of life, as it appears to us when we are twenty. To row in and out of the brown reefs, over a sea as blue and shining as the eyes of the girl in the stern of the boat, along flowery shores, where birds of gorgeous plumage flitted amongst the beautiful foliage, was to John Mordaunt a foretaste of

heaven. And Nan, unconscious at first, put down the fulness of her happiness to the beauty around her—the sunshine and the fairyland loveliness of those flowery isles amidst their gleaming waters.

How much of it was due to these calm, golden effects of Nature? How much to John's chivalrous manliness, and Nan's girlish sweetness and charm? The test soon came. Captain O'Brien's health broke down, and his thoughts turned towards home with a curious persistency, considering that for more than twenty years he had delighted in colonial life. John Mordaunt accompanied them on the long voyage, and came to see the last of them in the old country before he went back to New South Wales, where he meant to acquire a fortune for Miss Anne's sake. Together they used to build castles in the air of most magnificent structure—though, as far as that went, Miss Anne was quite ready to follow him into the meanest cottage; it was only John who thought her feet too beautiful and tender to tread on anything less precious than woven gold.

The day before he left her they planted the little eucalyptus-tree in a sheltered corner of the garden. For though the skies were bleak and the country

dreary on this south-western coast of Ireland, there were sudden surprises here and there of plants and shrubs that seemed to have fallen by mistake from some hotter clime; and John declared her eucalyptus would flourish like the bay-tree.

It was here, too, that they had parted. They were certain of each other, come weal or woe. Only for a moment John felt a pang of jealous fear.

‘Oh, some one will steal you from me, Nan,’ he cried. ‘Promise me you will not change.’

Nan laughed with scorn at the idea.

‘Steal *me* from *you*? Never! Besides, no one will try.’

‘Yes, they will,’ said John despondently; ‘every one will try. You don’t know how lovely you are, Nan. Yes, it’s no use your blushing. You are like a lovely pink flower when you blush, and that makes you prettier than ever, so that any man who saw you would fall in love with you. But you must come here every day, and see how our tree is getting on, and that will remind you of me.’

‘Yes, we shall confide in each other. I, longing for you, and the eucalyptus longing for its native land, both here in this horrid country where it rains all the year round,’ sighed Nan.

‘Oh, you must be plucky, Nan. Look, what jolly wild hills and sea and rocks! It’s not up to *our* world, but still it is rather fine, too, in its way; and you, like the eucalyptus, must struggle bravely whenever the sun shines, and try not to notice the rain. Only be brave, my dear little Nan, and all will come right,’ said John, putting his strong arms round her, and looking down into her sad face with his kind steadfast eyes. ‘And always remember this: as fast as the eucalyptus grows, so fast my love will grow. Like it, my love will become stronger and higher, and more worthy of you, every hour that we are parted.’

But alas! these pretty pink and white blossoms are the first to fall, and with the fading of the pinkness and whiteness, it is astonishing how quickly the prettiness seems to vanish too. Miss Anne could no longer be likened to a pink flower, unless it were to one dried and pressed between the pages of a book, its scent and colour long since fled. Five years’ constant attendance on a querulous invalid is enough to take the glow off any woman; and after her father’s death, Miss Anne had neither money

nor energy with which to face the outer world. So she remained in that bleak Irish home, where the long winters were so wet and grey, and where, to her sun-loving nature, the wild rugged scenery was utterly dreary and unsympathetic. True, she possessed a tiny fairyland in her garden, and had her golden dreams under the eucalyptus that had sprung up so gallantly, but for the rest she was, at heart, a little old maid wedded to routine.

The doctor's wife, the clergyman's maiden sisters, and a few more narrow-lived and narrow-thoughted dwellers in the village two miles off, were all that she had to depend upon for society. Every one knew that she had a romance of some sort; and at first, romances being rare in Ballakilloghe, this won her much deference. But as year after year passed by, and still Miss Anne's mysterious expectations bore no fruit, the other spinsters of the neighbourhood began to turn up their noses, and her little sentimentalities and growing old maidishness became a subject for ridicule.

The arrival of those wonderful foreign letters was quite a public event. They came about once in six months, and for at least a fortnight before they were due, Miss Anne, with her modest figure and

patient face, was daily seen stealing, half guiltily, down the street towards the post-office.

‘It must be going on for post-time,’ the Misses O’Kelly would say, with a contemptuous sniff. ‘There goes poor Miss Anne.’

Letters cherished like sacred relics, and full of interest and vigour and steady affection—full of John, in short; not the one from whom she had parted, but John grown stronger, wiser, and more experienced. Just what he used to be, only with his good qualities more fully developed, his youthful charm merged into the sterling worth of manhood.

Then, at last, there came a day when there was no foreign letter awaiting her at the post-office, though the mails were due, and he had never missed writing before. There was disappointment in Miss Anne’s heart as she pattered up the stony street in her goloshes; but of doubt—not an atom. The unclouded faith of ten years was not to be shattered in a day simply because of the non-arrival of a letter dependent upon winds and tides and steam. He might be ill—and here she hurried on nervously as if she would outstep unspoken fears—or he might have been delayed by sea, and so have missed the mail, or—

‘Miss Anne! Miss Anne!’ called a voice, ‘sure it’s no forren letter for you at all this day, but jist a telegraph from Cork that got astray in the parson’s bag enthirely.’

It was Matt Flynn, the postman, hurrying after her, waving an unfamiliar-looking envelope over his head. He knew, like every one else, the mysterious importance of Miss Anne’s letters.

‘For me? From Cork?’ she said indifferently, as she tore open the yellow envelope and glanced at the message.

Then her heart gave a great bound. For a moment the little white houses on either side of the street seemed to reel and fall, a great white mist, in front of her; whilst something, that was half delirious joy, half acute physical pain, turned her face as white as a sheet.

Only for a moment. Then, outwardly as calm and collected as she considered it due to her womanly dignity always to appear before the opposite sex, she quietly read, for the second time, those badly written, pencilled, wonderful words—

‘I shall be with you to-morrow about half-past four. John Mordaunt, Cork.’

II

‘No bad news, I hope? Nothing to distress you?’ asked the eldest Miss O’Kelly, fixing her inquisitive eyes on Miss Anne’s face. ‘Telegrams are such startling things, you know. We felt that we must come and make sure that you were not in trouble.’

‘No—no, thank you; it was nothing of that sort. Quite the contrary,’ stammered Miss Anne, with ill-suppressed cheerfulness. ‘That is to say, it was no bad news.’

‘Ah!—then we may be relieved of our fears, dear Miss Anne. We were so afraid, knowing that you had not received your usual letter, that perhaps some friend was ill, or something of that sort. But, indeed, what business is it of ours?’

The sisters O’Kelly had tracked her to where she was sitting under the eucalyptus-tree. Nothing but curiosity could have induced them to toil so far under a scorching sun, along a shadeless road under the hills; but curiosity is an infallible spur to even

the most faded of spinsters. That something unusual was about to occur was evident from Miss Anne's flutters of suppressed excitement, and the smiles that kept beaming over the faded thin cheeks. On the other hand, she looked pale and exhausted, as if the unexpected joy, whatever it was, had literally been too much for her. Miss O'Kelly pointedly remarked on this, and felt sure her friend ought not to be out so much in the sun.

'I like the sun; it is so seldom we have too much of it here,' answered Miss Anne; 'and I assure you my health is as good as ever it was.'

'Perhaps it was that telegram,' put in Miss Grace; 'and not getting your letter and all. It must have given you quite a turn.'

'No, no,' murmured Miss Anne. A ghost of a blush mantled her cheeks. She felt so full of importance, so overwhelmed by her joy, that she longed to confide even in Miss O'Kelly. Engaged to John Mordaunt, who was coming home to-morrow to take her away with him! No wonder she was self-conscious and elated.

Then the conversation turned to the Working Guild in Aid of Distressed Irish Ladies, in a languishing way certainly, since all along the Misses

O'Kelly were working up to the great secret, whilst Miss Anne's wandering thoughts were with the morrow.

'You would be a great loss to us,' said Miss Grace, at last becoming desperate, 'if ever you were to leave the Guild. But I suppose we may count on you as a member next year again?'

The bait took. Miss Anne looked up with her tell-tale blush and tremors. An expansion of confidence and longing for sympathy came over her again.

'I—I cannot tell,' she said; 'next year matters may be so different; one can never be sure what may happen.'

'You are not thinking of leaving us?' cried the sisters, with a crescendo of interrogation.

'No—oh no! At least, that is to say—oh, indeed, I meant nothing,' Miss Anne expostulated feebly; 'but next year is a long way to look forward to, Miss O'Kelly.'

'Why, Miss Anne, one might think you were going to be married,' cried Miss Grace, with a loud laugh to cover the pointedness of her remark; 'one might indeed.'

Miss Anne dropped her crochet and, clasping

her hands nervously together, lowered her bashful eyes. Her secret seemed to be burning her tongue.

‘Well—well—yes, Miss O’Kelly ; yes, Miss Grace. Perhaps it may be so—perhaps so. Strange things happen, do they not? And you would not expect it of me—I have never given you any cause to think such a thing could happen to me. But yes, Miss Grace, you have guessed right. I think—that is, I know—I am sure that I am going to be—to be—’

‘No ! I could not have believed it. I never did expect it of you,’ ejaculated Miss O’Kelly, rising, and opening her parasol with a jerk. ‘But I am sure we wish you joy ; though indeed it does seem strange at first—considering that you have never told us a word of it—and your age too. But that is neither here nor there, and we are the last people to remind you of it. Well ! all I can say is that you have borne your waiting nobly, Miss Anne—nobly. And may the gentleman have been as faithful on his part is the sincerest wish I can offer you.’

Miss Anne watched the retreating figures with no feeling of soreness or disappointment. They were unsympathetic and suspicious ; but then, poor

things, they knew nothing about man's love, and how constant it can be. At all events they had never known John, so whatever might be their knowledge of love, it could not be so perfect and complete as her own.

How she hoped it would be a day like this when he arrived! How beautiful the world was in this bright sunshine! It was surprising to her, now, that she had been so blind to the peaceful grandeur of the hills, and the shining loveliness of the sea that encircled their feet. And how delicately the eucalyptus leaves traced themselves against the blue. *Their* tree, whose rapid growth had been such a solace to her superstitious soul, as an emblem of John's love and faith. It had shot up tall and strong during those ten years; rather an incongruity, at first sight, in that wild country, before one had found out the rare beauties that spring up in the moist soil of the Emerald Isle.

Where should she meet him? Here, where they had parted? Or quietly in the sitting-room, where no one would see if he——

Miss Anne shivered, and felt a little shocked at her own thoughts.

Should she run to meet him, or wait until he

came? Should she cry out with glad delight, or be silent until he had spoken? What should she wear? What would they say to each other? What would it all be like, this great, wonderful, long long dreamed-of meeting?

She had gone over these questions a hundred times before; and what generally won the day was the meeting under the eucalyptus-tree, she in the white gown in which he had last seen her, and in which he had told her she looked like a lovely pink flower. Not many words would be spoken; only 'Nan' and 'John,' and then that unmentionable token of which Miss Anne blushed to think. After that, life presented a golden blank to her; imagination could go no further.

How often Miss Anne set and re-set, tapped and re-tapped the barometer in the porch that evening it is impossible to say. Even Biddy, her buxom parlour-maid, felt her stolid brain penetrated by a sense of coming revolution, and, with a shrewd guess at the nature of it, could not help staring fixedly at her mistress to see what effect it had upon her. Miss Anne blushed and fidgeted, and tried not to smile consciously. She had always heard that the world looked upon women with a

different respect the moment they were engaged. Certainly it seemed to her that interested, inquisitive eyes pursued her to-day, and that the very air was charged with her secret.

‘The glass is going down, Biddy. I am afraid there will be a break in the weather,’ she remarked tentatively, as she took her bedroom candle and said good-night to the girl. ‘But the glass is sometimes wrong, is it not, Biddy?’

‘To be sure it is, miss.’

‘I think it will be fine to-morrow; indeed I am sure it will be. I am very anxious that it should be fine to-morrow, Biddy, because—I am expecting a friend to see me.’

‘To be sure you are, miss,’ repeated Biddy, turning her back precipitately; and as Miss Anne paused once more to tap the weather-glass, she thought she heard a smothered giggle echoing down the back-stairs.

In the little tragedies and joys of our own lives we very seldom see how closely they are interwoven with the ridiculous, though it may be evident enough to our friends; and to Miss Anne her secret was nothing if not sublime.

Nothing may be perfect. Miss Anne's summer weather might just as well have lasted twenty-four hours longer, instead of turning first to a thin drizzle, then to gusts of wind and heavy rain that blurred garden and sea and hills into a dull white mist.

She could not meet him under the eucalyptus-tree. But she would have a fire lit in the sitting-room, and he could stretch himself comfortably in the big armchair as he used to do. Even in those days some little old-maidish instinct had always prompted her to tidy and tuck back the loose chintzes which he left in such disorder. She had filled the room with flowers the day before, and this morning she usurped her cook's place and made a pile of those cakes John used to like so much. After that she sat down with her crochet, in front of the clock, thinking over the past, and over the time that was coming; and finally, with a sudden feeling of half fright, half shyness, stole up to her room to put on that long laid-by gown of fresh white muslin.

How strange it seemed to exchange the familiar grey stuff for anything so youthful and bridelike.

She felt almost like a widow leaving off her weeds for the first time. It was so loose, too! She had no idea she had been so plump as a girl; but there was nothing to regret in that: John had always said he disliked fat women; and besides she would soon get back her old health and colour now that she was going to be happy and cared for. Should she wear a rose at her throat? There would just be time to run downstairs and get one.

In the passage she met Biddy, and this time the girl's laughter could by no means be suppressed. For a moment she stared in amazement at the strange little figure decked in bridal white, the thin face looking more than ever prematurely old, in spite of the joy radiating from her eyes; then fled downstairs.

Miss Anne ran back to her room. The slight exertion took away her breath, and her head reeled. It was excitement, she said to herself; joy had come with too sudden a shock, and she was nervous now that the time was so near. It was four o'clock; time to be waiting quietly in the sitting-room. For a moment she hesitated. Then, scarcely knowing why, but perhaps with some dim sense of the fitness of things, she tore off the white gown,

hastily slipped into the quaker-like old homespun, and in a few minutes was sitting working before the fire—a quiet, prim, reserved woman of thirty-eight.

She was only just in time. A car was dashing up the gravel drive. She heard the ring of the bell, the banging of the door, the bustle of arrival, coat, hat, and stick flung on to the hall table, a kind of general sensation that some one was in the house whom it was not large enough to hold, and then . . .

III

AGAIN that feeling of faintness, of joy literally taking away her breath. Unconsciously she still went on hurriedly working ; she dared not raise her head or speak. Yet she was not afraid ; had not one vestige of doubt of any kind ; knew that love was actually with her, here in that little room.

‘Nan ! I have come back. Won’t you speak to me, and look at me ?’

It was John’s voice, full and deep, with a ring of solemn joy in it that sounded to her like music.

‘Wait,’ she whispered. ‘It is too much just at first. Let me listen—and know.’

‘It is ten years, Nan,’ he went on. ‘How much time we have to make up for ! Have you no welcome for me ?’

‘Oh, wait,’ she repeated. ‘It has been so sudden. Let me get used to it. It is enough, at first, to know that you are here, here in this very room. I

dare not speak to you, I dare not look at you yet. Wait a few moments, John.'

There was silence. And during those 'few moments' John Mordaunt underwent one of the bitter tragedies that only to outsiders wear the grotesque stamp of the ridiculous. He, too, had had his illusions in those ten years—one that he had borne about with him by land and sea in a tiny morocco case—the miniature of a girl with round pink cheeks and shining eyes, in the very prime of beauty and freshness.

What he now saw was a little faded woman with straight, neatly brushed hair, whose sunken eyes told of ill-health and perpetual dulness of life; freshness and brightness gone, without expression gained; girlhood dead; in its stead, a washed-out womanhood, with none of the depth and completeness that intellect and experience give, in the place of youth, to stronger natures.

Nan was dead. He did not know this woman. How could he speak to her as he would have spoken to Nan? Where were the sympathy and mutual knowledge that used to exist between them? His heart sank like lead as he thought of what the future held for him in marriage with this ghost of

his early love. What follies were the fancies of boys and girls!

So when Miss Anne had sufficiently recovered from her maidenly embarrassment to raise her eyes to John's face, what she saw written in it was not love and tenderness, but consternation, regret, and pitiful wonder; his first expression of affection gradually drying up into the ceremonious politeness due to any woman or stranger.

'You are greatly changed,' he said, in a grave, distant way; 'I should hardly have known you again.'

'I should have known you anywhere,' she faltered; then drew herself up stiffly. 'Ten years is a long time; it leaves room for many changes.'

'Yes, yes. It was very hard upon you,' he said kindly. 'It was wrong to bind you to me all those years; I ought never to have asked it. And few women would have gone through with it.'

She did not answer, but took up her work again. Everything seemed to have come to a full-stop. She scarcely realised what had happened, but was vaguely conscious that she would have given all she possessed to live those years over again. They had been redeemed by hope; now there was nothing but

blank desolation and death in her heart. For the sympathy that had been killed in John's breast was, in hers, still alive and throbbing, and had helped her to read his unspoken thought in one lightning flash; his disappointment, his sudden knowledge that he had outgrown her, and lived *past* her.

He made an effort to speak naturally, and put her at her ease, if possible to hide from her his discovery. Already the grim humour of the situation was beginning to strike his senses, mingled with its pitiful sadness.

'I saw the eucalyptus as I drove in,' he said; 'what a success it has been. I always told you it would be. Now it is quite a respectable tree. Do you remember planting it?'

'I never forget anything,' answered Miss Anne drily. 'I have a very long memory, and there is nothing here to make me forget. We are quiet people at Ballakillogge.'

'Tell me everything that has happened. How have you passed your life?' asked John. 'There must be more than the bare outline you gave me in your letters.'

'I told you everything—everything. There is nothing for you to hear. I would far rather know

what *you* have done. You have lived your life ; I have only waited.'

'I know, I know ! "Men must work, and women must weep." That must always be so, and the advantage is all on our side,' he said pityingly. 'Five years ago I hoped our probation was over ; but things went wrong, and I had to begin all over again. I have much to tell you, Nan.'

She signed to him to go on, and, glad of anything to break the threatening silence, he told her the story of those ten years, conscious, all the time, that every word he spoke widened the gulf between them. His eyes took in every detail of the neat little room, even to the three books on the round table : a *Leisure Hour*, a well-used *Hints on Knitting*, and a smartly bound Gray's *Poems*—evidently more for ornament than use. Intellect, too, had run to seed ; there was not a single point at which their minds could unite in intelligent sympathy ; there could never be anything more than tender pity on one side, blind admiration on the other.

Outside, the rain dashed against the windows, and the wind whirled round the garden in passionate gusts, swaying the trees to and fro, and rattling

the windows as though it longed to burst into the room, and dash down the unnatural calm and stiffness of the man and woman sitting there.

John did all the talking, only pausing now and then whilst Miss Anne was counting her stitches. He stayed there for nearly two hours, which seemed to them both as though they would never end. And when at last he got up to leave her, it must be confessed that a very tough battle was being fought out between his sense of honour and all the other senses that drew so forcibly in an opposite direction. But with John Mordaunt the issue of such struggles never hung long in the balance.

He kept Miss Anne's thin fingers in his, and looked down on her with his kind eyes.

'May I come back to-morrow, Nan?' he asked gravely. 'There is one thing of which we have not spoken yet.'

Does beauty consist only of perfect lines and glowing colour? For a moment Miss Anne's face, as she raised it transfigured by gratitude and adoration, had caught back some reflection of the girlish charm and brightness that had won John Mordaunt's heart amongst the summer isles of the South Sea.

IV

THERE was a great storm that night, blowing straight from the Atlantic, so that the salt spray was seized up by the wind and dashed far inland over the shuddering leafage.

Miss Anne crouched by the wood fire, and thought of the fishermen at sea, and wondered if John was in a like storm far away amongst the South Sea Islands. She could not so soon fall out of the habit of thinking of him like this ; she felt so dull, so exhausted after the day's unusual excitement, that it was difficult to collect her thoughts. When Biddy came to say her frugal dinner was getting cold, she told her not to wait—she was not hungry—she did not want anything to-night, except perhaps a biscuit and a cup of tea later. And Biddy, who could not understand such an event as an engagement being celebrated without eating and drinking, told Jane that Miss Anne and her sweetheart had been having 'words.' She

felt still more convinced of this when she carried in the lamp and found her mistress in the same listless attitude, with a scared look in her eyes.

Miss Anne drew herself up when she felt the girl's gaze upon her, and spoke nervously—

‘It is a terrible night, Biddy. I seem to hear the waves rolling up the coast like thunder, and the wind cuts through me. It makes me nervous. I am afraid something terrible will happen to-night, Biddy.’

‘Faith, miss, it’s no worse than we’ve had many a time o’ winter. Make your mind aisy; why, what should happen, mavourneen?’

‘I feel it—I feel it,’ she answered, with a shudder. ‘There! Listen, Biddy! What a gust! Oh, it is as if every tree in the garden had fallen with a crash.’

‘You jist frighten me, miss!’ cried Biddy. ‘You go to bed and sleep it off, and you’ll be better to-morrow, for sure.’

But Miss Anne sprang up with a sharp cry, and pushed the girl from her.

‘Oh, it has come, I heard it—I saw it,’ she moaned. ‘Run and see what has happened, Biddy—quick—near the eucalyptus in the garden.’

Then she sank back in her chair trembling, listening eagerly to every sound ; to Biddy and Jane's bright voices as they ran, gaily chattering, out into the blustering storm ; to their quick footsteps going and coming ; and then to their whispered conversation in the hall, outside her room. She could bear it no longer, but, suddenly opening the door, stood before them, looking like a ghost.

'Och ! Miss Anne, don't look like that,' exclaimed Biddy ; 'sure it's nothin' to fret over.'

Miss Anne interrupted her very quietly, speaking like one in a trance.

'The eucalyptus-tree has been blown down ?' she asked calmly.

Biddy took refuge in her native talent, and prevaricated.

'Sure, miss, is it likely ? havin' stood sich a deal of stormin' these ten years. You jist go in to the fire, and never worry about the trees, dear heart. One gone, another comes. An' it's a long-legged strip of a thing neither, with no shade to speak of.'

'It has been blown down ?' repeated Miss Anne sharply. 'Answer me, Biddy.'

'To be sure it has. Snapped right in its middle,

an' a wonder it's stood so long; such a lanky bit of a tree,' quoth Biddy. 'Faith an' it was.'

Miss Anne pressed her hand to her side as if she had been shot. For a moment she stood there, gazing straight in front of her with wide, miserable eyes—looking so small and grey and narrow in that clinging dress; then she turned silently into her room, and closed the door after her.

How cold it was! She drew her chair close up to the hearth, where the cheerful blaze had flamed itself away, and the logs burned red and black over hot gold ashes.

She thought of the dead eucalyptus. Only yesterday it had stood in the sunshine, tall and erect as—as— Yes, she had always thought of them together. Both so tall and strong; both emblematic to her of love growing in strength through the storms of lonely years. Now it had broken; snapped in two like any other frail thing—woman's courage and man's faith; all the brave upward striving of those ten years gone for nought.

Well, she had known it. All that evening the presentiment had been heavy upon her; ever since she had caught the look of disappointment in

John's face and eyes. He would come back and claim her, and try to make her happy. But love, passion, sympathy?—she knew, without understanding why, that they were gone for ever. They would be husband and wife, but their thoughts would be as far apart as their lives had been for so long. No; she, too, would be brave, and save him from herself. What he loved was the pink-cheeked, sunny-eyed Nan who had laughed and been young with him; and Nan had died long ago. It was only her ghost that sat there, a forlorn little old maid, staring into the dying embers.

Outside in the wind and rain, the eucalyptus-tree, smitten by a sudden storm, lay dead; and John's love was dead, and something else that was of no value to any one was passing away too with the night.

The wood fire had smouldered away, and the ashes lay white on the stone hearth. Through a chink in the shutters crept the cold light of a pale summer dawn, falling on the motionless figure of Miss Anne, small and precise, with head slightly drooping, and the still hands primly folded on her lap.



THE SOUL OF DAPHNE



THE SOUL OF DAPHNE

I

For two days and nights snow had fallen unceasingly. The first day slowly, with large, wavering white flakes gleaming through the crisp air, as if a beneficent white angel were spreading his sheltering wings over the little delicate germs of lovely things that awaited the passing of the twilight; the second day in slanting whirlwinds of numbing wet motes, that clung to every resisting substance with a silent, ghostly persistence, like the touch of Fate. Sky, sea, and moor were blurred into a murky, yellowish-grey uniformity. It was hard to tell where day ended and night began, except that every now and then, after many hours of this darkness, a watery moon, struggling feebly and fitfully through the grey pall, cast a sallow tinge over the surrounding clouds. But for this the world seemed to be asleep, given up to the silent ghosts of all the dead who have ever died.

On the moor the thick soft snow stretched for miles without a crease. An army might have marched across it without its tread being heard. Its wide, unbroken expanse gave it the indescribable mournfulness of those melancholy plains seen in dreams, where a vague horror spreads and grows beneath our gaze, until the whole world is embraced in it.

Over this white desert a man and woman were walking. The woman was hanging on to the man's arm, panting a little from the exertion of dragging her feet through the clinging, woolly mass. Physically, her companion appeared to be the weaker of the two, and his slight, boyish figure, with its stooping shoulders, made him look shorter than the woman, with her uprightness and vigour of movement. Yet where she failed and staggered from the clogging weight round her feet, his spring and lightness gave him an advantage, and the mere touch of his fingers round her own kept from her all sense of weariness or effort.

What dim light there was came, not from above, but from the whiteness at their feet reflecting the rare gleams of moonlight, and throwing up, now

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and then, a weird pallor on their faces. It showed hers to be full of life and colour, his pale and delicate, with strikingly bright, piercing eyes. The clinging touch of their entwined fingers bespoke them lovers, and, as a matter of fact, they were a young couple on their honeymoon.

Their gay voices and laughter broke startlingly through the morose silence—a note of joy gruesomely out of keeping with the deathlike pall that enveloped them.

‘This is the wildest, most ridiculous of your freaks,’ said the woman, pausing to take breath. ‘No one but a scatter-brained poet would dream of leaving a warm fireside for the sake of wandering blindly into a fog like this. If there were anything to see—a storm, some terrific conflict of the elements—one might understand it. But snow and mist inspire me with nothing but a sore throat.’

‘You must have some imagination,’ answered the young man, in quick, joyous tones. ‘It is an experience to be lost in darkness, “alone on a wide, wide” moor. How do we know what the fog is hiding from us? If we had true vision, who can say what we might not discover behind the veil?

The moor is transfigured ; there are spirits around us : you are one—I am one. I cannot see your face, nor you mine. And everywhere there is mystery. How do you know that you are you, or that I am I ?'

‘Because only you could talk such nonsense. Because these are your fingers, forcing me to follow you into all the odd byways of the world. A spirit has no will ; it could not *compel*—it could only urge.’

He laughed, and loosed her hand.

‘Now, are you free ?’

‘Free as air.’

‘And glad to be free ?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, though to his keen ears it seemed that her voice was troubled ; ‘Yes, glad ; but also afraid.’

He caught her hand again with his long, sensitive fingers, circling it lightly, but with a curious magnetic firmness.

‘And happy ?’

‘Oh yes ; quite happy.’

He laughed again, boyishly exhilarated.

‘Ah ! you are safe with me. Your soul is mine. But it is such a beautiful soul that I will make

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a palace of my heart for it to live in, and afterwards—'

‘Afterwards,’ she interrupted, ‘you will find out that it is a soul of clay, quite unworthy of such a palace as a poet’s heart. Just now it longs for fire, food, and rest. Prosaic demands, but horribly imperious.’

‘I know. But, to be quite honest, my Daphne—’

‘We are lost?’

‘Something like it. I was a selfish fool to bring you out.’ He answered penitently, ‘The snow gets more blinding every minute. Are you frightened?’

‘No. Only cold.’

‘Listen! Isn’t that the sea?’

She stood still, listening eagerly.

‘I hear nothing; but it might be. Possibly we have wandered towards the coast. In that case, Julian, I see nothing for it but to stand where we are till daylight comes. If we go back we shall be benighted on the moor. If we go forward we shall walk straight over the cliff into the sea.’

‘We might do worse,’ said Julian lightly. ‘Think of it, Daphne! To walk on through this

strange white mist straight into space—you and I together. There can be no death where we are together. Here we have exhausted happiness; we have touched perfection,—we are touching it now; nothing in the future can exceed it—much may fall below it. Why should we hesitate? A new joy may await us in another world.'

'I prefer to reach it in the natural way,' answered Daphne, forcing him to stand still. 'You frighten me. Your faith may be strong enough; but mine is not. I could not follow you.'

'You could follow me anywhere!' He dropped his half-mocking tone, and took her hands in his. The intensity of his strange bright eyes, brilliant with a kind of spiritual ardour, imparted to her more prosaic soul something of his own enthusiasm. His hold over her was like magnetism; apart from this mental influence she was drawn to him by no feeling more passionate than respect and admiration. It was the physically robust, rather commonplace nature acknowledging the supremacy of mind.

'I could compel you to follow me,' he went on; 'I will never believe that love like ours is finite. The grave cannot part us. Your soul is mine for

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ever. If I die before you, I shall only have to call to it, and it would force you to come to me.'

'Oh, indeed you frighten me, Julian! Why should you die first? And if you did, think what it would be for me to feel that you, in your grave, grudged me my life on earth!'

'On the contrary, I should wish you to fulfil your life to the uttermost. I should only call to you if you were in danger or distress, without me to see that you were always happy. But come! At this moment my fine care of you has lost you on an unknown moor in the depth of darkness. Surely I hear a muffled sound of waves. Where are we?'

There was a moment's pause; then she spoke, with a mixture of diffidence and defiance.

'The moor is not quite strange to me. I was here once, as a girl. I believe we must have wandered towards a little fishing-village called Hovendeen. A few seconds ago I fancied I saw a light not far from us. Let us call for help.'

Their united voices, full of the freshness of youth, rang through the sodden air. The silence, when this joyous sound ceased, was more oppressive than ever.

‘Listen!’ said Daphne: ‘some one is answering. Call again, Julian.’

He obeyed. This time a man’s deep voice shouted in response, and a moment later the gleam of a lantern flickered through the fog. The wind was beginning to rise, moaning, now and then, in sad gusts over the waste of snow, and driving the falling flakes in wild, eddying circles before it. It was impossible to see anything in the grey chaos, and it was only when they were within arm’s reach of their unknown deliverer, guided to him more by the sound of his voice than by the half blotted-out lantern, that they could tell what manner of man he was. Then Julian made out that he looked like a gentleman, was tall, with rather a morose, dark face, in keeping with the deep tones of his voice.

Daphne was lagging behind, dragging on to her husband’s hand, so that it was on Julian’s face that the light first fell.

‘We have disturbed you at an unchristian hour,’ he began apologetically. ‘You must think us very annoying—more especially since our presence here is due to our fault and not our misfortune. Could you direct us to a village or cottage where we could

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find shelter, or a conveyance of some sort? My name is Fairfax: we are strangers in this part of the world, and have completely lost our bearings.'

'You are welcome to anything I can offer you,' answered the stranger stiffly, but with something attractive in his voice and manner. 'I presume it is your wife who is with you.'

As he spoke, he stared hard through the snow, first at Julian, then beyond him.

'Yes. It is for her that I am anxious,' said Julian, drawing Daphne forward.

She had taken her hand from his, and at the moment that the light flashed upon her she was standing motionless, her eyes, full of startled recognition, fixed upon their new-found friend. He, too, had moved close to her, and was gazing down into her face with a fervour that verged on passion. Their eyes met; and the glance that passed between them was that indescribable swift look of secret understanding that flashes between a man and woman who have once loved and parted: on her side a look of anxiety and warning; on his, of anguish and passion.

Julian Fairfax's swift intelligence grasped the situation at once. There was perfect confidence

between him and his wife, and he was fully aware that he had had a very formidable rival in this man.

It struck him now, even in the indistinct light, what a much better assorted couple they would have made: both tall, active, full of life and vigour; whilst he, at best, was only the shadow of a man, far more highly developed mentally than physically. He could feel nothing but sympathy for the man who, having loved Daphne, had lost her.

‘If I am not mistaken,’ he said, holding out his hand, ‘we are indebted to Geoffrey Treherne. I am glad to meet you, even in such an unseasonable place and hour.’

Geoffrey Treherne scanned the smaller figure by his side with undisguised contempt. Julian, who had conquered, could afford to be generous; but to the other resentment was still bitterly poignant.

‘I am glad to be of any use,’ he said coldly. ‘My house is close by. If you keep straight on to the left you will come to the garden, and then you may consider your troubles over.’

He gave his arm to Daphne, flashing the lantern before her to guide her steps. Its yellow light shone on the white snow at their feet, and turned

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the falling flashes before them into golden mist ; Julian's figure was transfigured by it for a moment, then vanished in the shadows beyond, and his voice, with its peculiar sweetness and clearness, came back to them, now and again, like a voice from some spirit-world.

They followed him silently. For several months Geoffrey Treherne had struggled honestly and bravely to forget Daphne ; but this sudden meeting showed him how utterly he had failed. He was a man of few but very strong affections, and his love had been an all-absorbing passion, which his solitude and would-be forgetfulness had only fostered into deeper feeling. At this moment he felt that life without Daphne was not only worthless, but *impossible* ; the very touch of her hand on his arm was making his head swim with mingled rapture and despair.

‘Where is Julian?’ she asked, rather nervously, affected by his agitation. ‘He will lose himself again. Julian ! wait for us.’

‘I am here—all right !’ he called back cheerily. ‘This way, Treherne ? How close we are to the sea ! I can plainly hear it breaking against the rocks.’

‘Do be careful,’ begged Daphne: ‘remember, Julian——’

‘Remember, Daphne,’ he laughed back, ‘that if I walk into nothingness you are pledged to follow me. Your soul is mine; if I call to it, it will come to me. Which way did you say, Treherne? Left or right?’

‘Right.’

The fog hid him from their sight, and his gay laughter, carried away by the wind, no longer reached them. Geoffrey Treherne’s hand closed passionately over the small fingers resting on his arm, and when Daphne drew them hastily away, he caught them again with a low laugh of triumph.

‘Your soul is his,’ he said slowly. ‘Come! shall we follow him?’

II

A year and a half had passed. It was early June ; all the valley grass-lands and meadows were fenced round with luscious pink-and-white hawthorn, and carpeted with golden buttercups. From his house on the edge of the moor Geoffrey Treherne could look in one direction down over the cultivated valley, on the other across the blue sea. At the back of the house the moor, already beginning to burst into heathery sweetness, stretched away as far as the eye could reach.

To-night, as he sat with his wife by the open window, the long-lingered summer twilight cast a glamour over everything. Sky and sea and land were bathed in a kind of fairylike unreality ; even Daphne's beauty seemed to be enhanced by a new delicacy.

She was kneeling at the window, resting her elbows on the sill, her face bright with content and enjoyment. She was not strictly beautiful, nor was

there anything peculiarly striking in her character or mind. But she was one of those women who inspire men with passion; Julian Fairfax had felt it, and Geoffrey Treherne now, in his turn, was completely dominated and taken possession of by it.

‘I like your home,’ she was saying. ‘I did not know I cared for the country; but I begin to love Moorfield.’

‘If you did not we would go away,’ he answered, stroking her rough fair hair; ‘but if you are happy——’

‘Happy?’ she interrupted; ‘oh, I am so happy that I am half afraid.’

He drew her nearer to him.

‘So am I,’ he said quickly. ‘They say that there is no such thing as perfection; but we have falsified the saying. One wonders if one has any right to such happiness as ours.’

Daphne slid one of her hands into his.

‘I know what you mean. You are thinking of—Julian—and how short a time it is since I was happy, too, with him. The world calls me callous and forgetful, I suppose. And yet I feel no shame in my new happiness; on the contrary, I take pride in it.’

As he made no answer she turned her head and

looked up into his face with her steadfast eyes and joyously untroubled smile.

‘I have not forgotten that night,’ she continued. ‘How should I? I loved him, you know—not as I love *you*, as my companion—but as one must love what is good and beautiful. He was above me; I did not understand him; I always felt like a child in his power—my very thoughts seemed scarcely to belong to me. Yet I was content that it should be so. It was like having some good angel always with me, taking away from me all necessity of choice in the affairs of life—almost, one might say, merging my own individuality into his higher and stronger nature. I think the difference is just this, that he had my soul, whilst you——’

Geoffrey sprang to his feet, thrusting her from him so roughly that she half fell. The next moment he caught her in his arms with a passionate outburst of devotion.

‘Your soul?’ he cried; ‘yes! but I have your heart—I have you—all that is human and adorable in you. I am envious of no one. We are together; and we love each other as no two beings ever loved before. Why should you rake up the past to torture me?’

She shook her head, stopping his passionate words with a little gesture of reproof, though, womanlike, she liked to hear them.

‘It was not to torture you,’ she answered: ‘you torture yourself. Oh, I know that well enough. You are jealous of the dead. That is why I spoke of him to-night. I wish you to know what I know most positively: this—that he, if he can see us now, is rejoicing over our happiness. That was his nature. Selfishness was a mystery to him. Sometimes we spoke of death—he was very fragile, you know, and had faced it all his life—and often he told me that his worst pang would be, not that I should forget, but that I should go on sorrowing. He would have wished things to be as they are now; and, perhaps, now that you know this, you will give up your foolish brooding. He used to say—’

‘Well?’

‘It was folly, of course—but he used to say that my soul was so entirely his, that if ever I were sad and in trouble he would know it, even in the grave, and save me from myself. Oh, don’t shrink from me! See, Geoffrey! it is all so plain. If what he said is true, he must be glad to know that I am at

peace—that a man like you loves and cherishes me, and makes me so happy.' She laughed softly, and touched his hand lightly with her lips: '*All joy is gain.*'

'However gained? Is that so?' he answered impetuously. 'God! I would sell body and soul to gain the joy of having you—to live moments like this—'

They sat thus for a long time in silence, until the evening light had faded and the world lay before them in blue moonlight splendour. The stillness was so complete that they both started at the sudden sound of footsteps crackling up the gravel path, followed by a resounding knock at the house-door.

'A visitor at this hour?' exclaimed Geoffrey, thrusting his head out of the window: 'who on earth—— My God!'

His voice died away huskily; when he turned his face to Daphne it was as white as a corpse, and he was trembling like a child. She, too, had trembled for an instant, but no longer.

'What are you thinking of, Geoff?' she cried quickly. 'It is only Tom Fairfax. I did not know he was in England; but I recognise him by his

rolling walk. Come ! we will let him in ourselves, before he breaks in the door.'

She ran on in front, and when Geoffrey reached the hall he found her gaily welcoming the newcomer, a big, strong young man with a ringing voice, and loud, hearty manners. He grasped Geoffrey warmly by the hand before Treherne had quite realised that this was the brother of his wife's first husband. The resemblance that had startled him was all the more curious from the difference of physique. Tom Fairfax was simply a larger, coarser, materialised edition of his finer-souled brother.

'Delighted to make your acquaintance, I am sure,' he exclaimed, wringing Geoffrey's hand. 'Seemed a bit hard-hearted at first, of course. But it's the way with women ; the best of 'em are but kittle cattle. You've got a nice thing here in the way of a homestead, eh ? I'd not mind settling in a country like this myself, if it wasn't that life here seems a trifle tame after the Colonies.'

Daphne had led them into the little dining-room, where supper was already laid.

'Sit down ; sit down,' said Geoffrey cordially. 'You are just in time for supper ; unexpected, but not the less welcome. Daphne, I'll fetch up a

bottle of old port, and we will make your—your brother-in-law tell us some bush yarns over it.'

When he came back he found the young man thoroughly at home, discoursing volubly whilst he made vigorous attacks on the round of cold beef. Daphne, having recovered from her first shyness, was in her highest spirits, and the little party lacked nothing in the way of friendliness and gaiety. Tom Fairfax's blunt good-humour and unconventionality were refreshing. Geoffrey began to warm towards him, and suggested that he should leave the village inn and put up at Moorfield.

'A thousand thanks,' answered Fairfax; 'but I must be going north to-morrow. I only ran down to see how Daphne was doing for herself; and—well! not only that, perhaps.'

He tried to pitch his jovial voice to a becomingly serious key. 'You know I was damned fond of poor Julian. I used to fight his battles when he was a little chap—a tough champion I was too, I believe!—and when I heard he'd gone I was terribly cut up. I thought I'd just like to hear how it all happened,—what his last words were,—you know the sort of thing. He was a dear fellow, God bless him!'

Geoffrey filled his glass and raised it to his lips. His hand trembled so that the wine shook over the rim, and trickled down his fingers on to the table-cloth. He was watching his wife's face intently. She looked a little distressed, but her honest eyes met Tom's questioning glance unflinchingly.

'Naturally,' she murmured, 'the subject is a very painful one. If there were more to tell it would not be so pitiful. It was the suddenness and silence of it—'

'Yes, yes! Poor fellow!'

'It was a wild night,' broke in Geoffrey in a low voice—'dark as hell! You could not see your own hand for the snow and the fog.'

'He was laughing on in front,' said Daphne, tears springing to her eyes. 'You remember how merry he was, Tom? No other laugh ever rang so true as his. I can hear it now—and then came that horrible silence.'

'One would like to have had a message of some sort,' said Tom wistfully. 'But, of course, when— Still, what were his last words?'

'*Your soul is mine; when I call to it, it will come to me.*'

Daphne looked across the table at her husband with a start.

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The words had come with a curious vivid intensity, as if they had been burning on his lips and had forced themselves into articulation. He was leaning back in his chair, raising his refilled glass with shaking hands. A wild supposition flashed across her that he was drunk.

‘It referred to a joke we had had,’ she explained feebly. ‘It hurts me to have to speak of it.’

‘Where were you?’ asked Fairfax sharply, turning his steady and rather bold stare upon Geoffrey.

‘He was helping me,’ said Daphne. ‘He called out to Julian which direction to take; he must have heard wrongly—or gone on too impetuously, after his wont. Oh! must we talk more about it?’

‘It’s an odd thing, but he always thought he would die young. You know he used to think he could read the future in the lines of one’s hand,’ went on Tom, spreading out his broad red palm and gazing at it musingly. ‘I never believed in that sort of nonsense myself; but it makes me feel queer when I remember what he foretold about his own future. He was convinced that he would meet with a violent death. So he did; not so horrible as what he foretold, but violent enough, Heaven knows!’

‘It could not have been more horrible,’ said

Daphne, shuddering with womanly awe at such a coincidence ; 'poor Julian was always——'

'What confounded nonsense !' broke in Geoffrey ; 'I will not have these ideas put into your head, Daphne. Once and for all, let us change the subject.'

'You are right,' she answered, looking at him with dawning curiosity in her eyes ; 'but first, let me hear what it was he had foretold. You must pardon me, Geoffrey, but it is only natural that I should be interested in Tom's memories.'

'You shall not hear !' cried Geoffrey violently ; 'not whilst I am here to prevent it.'

'Why, it was only an odd coincidence,' said Tom cheerily ; 'there can't be anything in those things really : I, for one, don't believe it. Besides, he was wrong, you see ! His was only an accident, whereas what it amused his mad fancy to foresee was nothing less than murder.'

'Murder !'

Geoffrey sprang from his chair, and leaning both hands on the table before him, stared across it at his wife. She, too, had risen and faced him. They bent forward until their faces nearly met, and their eyes, riveted in a long spellbound gaze, seemed to

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grow into each other's. Geoffrey felt that his wife's burning glance was scorching his very brain.

Tom Fairfax glanced from one to the other uneasily.

'Bless me! you needn't take it so seriously. There was no harm meant,' he said apologetically, rising and holding out his hand. 'I'll say good-bye, and good luck to you both till our next merry meeting. Good night, Daphne.'

'I will let you out,' she said quickly, following him to the door. 'Good night, good-bye, Tom. It was good of you to come.'

She watched his figure swinging along the garden walk into the bright moonlight, then softly closed the door.

Geoffrey stood leaning against the wall in the passage.

'Your brother-in-law has a very offensive manner,' he remarked, as she passed him. 'But, thank goodness! we are alone again. Give me your hand, dear one.'

She drew it gently from him, with a little shiver.

'Not to-night,' she answered. 'I am tired. I think I will go to bed.'

She moved languidly upstairs, groping her way by the banisters.

‘Why, my sweet Daphne,’ called out Geoffrey, with rather a wild laugh, ‘you have forgotten to kiss me. Come back and pay forfeit.’

‘Not to-night,’ she repeated wearily. ‘I am tired.’ He heard her light tread along the passage, then the closing of her bedroom door, and the grating sound of the key turning in the lock.

III

It was the first snowfall of the year. It had come late, with bitter perversity, like a cold rebuke to the aconites and early crocuses that, deluded by the mild winter, were already thrusting their cheerful heads through the brown soil. Moorfield, owing to its exposed site on the cliff, received the full brunt of the storm. Snow lay like a woolly blanket on the roof, and clung with gluelike adhesiveness to the walls and windows, oozing through the cracks in the window-sashes, and lying in wind-driven heaps along the garden paths. No one dreamed of going out. Even Geoffrey shut himself up with his farm accounts, or wandered disconsolately about the house, smoking an immoderate number of pipes.

Daphne crouched by the wide, old-fashioned fireplace. It was too dark to read; and the maid had forgotten to bring in the lights. She leant her head against the dark oak mantelpiece, and, closing

her eyes, tried to make herself believe that she was thinking of nothing but the next meeting at the Clothing Club in the village.

She had become thinner since the summer. Her face had lost its youth and colour; and in the depths of her eyes lurked an ever-present trouble. Her great joy had turned into the storm and stress of mental anguish. She was haunted by two ghosts: one, the ghost of her dead happiness and love; the other, a shadow which she dared not name, which stood by her side waking and sleeping, and turned the very pleasures of life into dust and ashes.

Presently Geoffrey came into the room, and rubbed his hands over the burning logs.

‘What a wretched fire!’ he exclaimed, flinging on more wood. ‘You have no idea of comfort, Daphne. Why don’t you ring for a lamp, or play the piano, or do something to make the place more cheerful?’

‘I did try to play,’ she answered; ‘but it sounded so incongruous that I left off. It is depressing weather. I thought snow was a rarity in this corner of England.’

‘So it is. We have had none since——’ He broke off with a forced laugh. ‘But no wonder

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you get moped if you sit in the dark doing nothing.
Why is not the room shut up ?'

She turned her head, and her glance followed his to the window. Outside nothing could be seen but a white blur. The grey sea and land had melted into each other ; it was like a world of the dead.

Before she could answer Geoffrey had roughly drawn the curtains, shutting out the dismal prospect, but leaving the room in yet deeper gloom.

Daphne shrank closer to the fire.

'I don't like the dark,' she said hurriedly. 'Go and fetch a light, Geoffrey.'

'Not yet. See, there is light for you,' he replied, stirring the logs into a blaze that sent a red flare over the ceiling, and lit her face with a ruddy glow ; 'light and warmth ; you and I together ! What more do you want ?'

'Nothing,' she murmured.

Geoffrey laid his hand on her shoulder.

'What is the matter with you ?' he questioned, with suppressed passion. 'See ! you tremble when I touch you ; you shrink from me when I come near you. One might think that my love frightened you. Is it so ?'

‘No, no.’

She spoke quite gently; but the horror in her eyes deepened, and when he put his face close to hers it was all she could do to control herself.

‘I worship you,’ he went on. ‘My life is bound up in yours. It is you who are changing.’

‘No,’ she said slowly; ‘when once I love I never change. You know that.’

‘I have your heart still?’

There was a short silence; then he bent over her.

‘I know what you are thinking,’ he said suddenly: ‘you are thinking of that night. Why should you? I am not afraid. My contract was for life. I ask no more. I wish for no more. Who can tell me that this life is *not* the end?’

‘Oh, don’t let us talk like this!’ she cried, trying to speak lightly. Then, unable to meet his eyes, she buried her face in her hands, bursting into uncontrollable weeping; and when he would have put his arms round her she pushed them gently aside and slipped past him out of the room.

Geoffrey stood staring into the flames. The firelight flickering on his face accentuated the darkness of his haggard eyes and the deep lines

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on his forehead. He too looked as if he had his ghosts ; there was always a strange, listening expression on his face, as though he were concentrating every sense to catch some distant sound.

‘Yes ; I have her heart, but I have broken it,’ he kept saying to himself.

Suddenly he moved to the window, and, dragging back the curtain, looked out into the darkness.

It was impossible to distinguish anything, so dense was the snow-fog. But suddenly a gleam of light came and went upon the whitened path, as from the quickly opened and closed door of a bright room. A second later a dark figure glided past him and disappeared into the mist.

Geoffrey’s heart leapt within him.

‘She too hears it,’ he muttered ; ‘it is not my fancy after all.’

He felt strangely calm, almost elated, as a man who has struggled long against terrible doubts feels at the moment when he rises above them and finds light once more. For Geoffrey there was no longer any doubt. The voice was calling to him, and he went.

The clammy snow swept chokingly in his face as he followed his wife along the garden walk, out on

to the moor, then to the right towards the sea. The wind sighed fitfully; and now and again he could hear the waves breaking at the foot of the cliff. It seemed to him that to-night and that bygone night two years ago were one; that there had been nothing in between; only this long, terrible coldness and greyness that would last for ever and ever.

His steps made no sound in the soft snow as he groped his noiseless way, guided partly by instinct, partly by the long low moan of the sea.

Presently he came to a standstill, peering forward as if his strained eyes could pierce through the blinding fog. He had found what he wanted, what he had expected.

Close to him, but with her back turned to him, he could distinguish the kneeling figure of a woman, her head and shoulders bowed, and her hands outstretched as though she saw something far away, and yearned to reach it.

Geoffrey crept nearer, until he was within ear-shot, then stood motionless, listening. All his passionate devotion to this woman rushed over him, mingled with the bitter knowledge that his very love had worked her misery.

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‘Julian! Julian!’ she sobbed: ‘can you hear me? Oh, I am so miserable!’

‘*Daphne.*’

She sprang to her feet with a startled cry; then, recognising Geoffrey, tried to turn it into a laugh.

‘Don’t be vexed,’ she murmured; ‘I meant no harm. Have you come to fetch me home?’

‘Yes.’ He held out his hand, but did not move. ‘You will catch your death of cold.’

‘Oh no! I am very strong. But it is a terrible night: we had better go home.’

Still he did not move. A gust of wind sighing past them lost itself over the invisible, dimly audible sea.

Daphne shivered.

‘Listen!’ she gasped. ‘Did you hear anything? I thought a voice——’

‘I *always* hear it,’ he answered; ‘day and night I hear it. Can you hear what it says?’

‘I dare not hear,’ she murmured.

‘This is what it says,’ he continued, in his low voice: ‘*Give me back my wife’s soul; it is mine; when I call to it, it will come to me.*’

She trembled from head to foot. All volition

deserted her; the intensity of his thought seemed to paralyse her.

‘It was a night like this,’ he added. ‘Do you remember?’

She bowed her head.

‘It was here that we were standing—almost on this very spot—and he went laughing on in front. No; not there—straight on. Yes, where you are now, but further.’

She moved mechanically away from him, and took a few steps forward.

‘Here?’ she whispered.

‘Further.’

She moved on again.

‘Here?’

‘Further.’

Her figure faded, indistinct and ghostlike, in the white mist. Her voice came back to him faint and far away.

‘Here?’

‘Still further.’

Geoffrey leant forward, shielding his eyes with his hand, and straining to see through the darkness. For a moment he caught sight of her—standing erect, her arms spread wide on either side, her

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head raised. Once more her voice sighed back to him.

'Here?'

'Further.'

He listened.

There was no sound—nothing but the thick soft snow falling silently through the fog, and a faint, far-off murmur of the sea.

THE BIRD-CHARMER





THE BIRD-CHARMER

I

THE child stood motionless watching the old man. There was a gap in the hedge, just at the height of his eyes, through which he could see into the next garden and, unobserved, discover the strange old wizard at his enchantments, and learn—who knows?—the magic spells himself.

Twice every day, morning and evening, the wizard left his gloomy house and came down the steps into the garden, wearing a long, melancholy green coat reaching to his heels, with a huge, widely bulging pocket on each side. Straggling white hair fell on to his shrunken shoulders, and his parchment face, sharp-featured, with piercing green eyes, made the child shiver deliciously with vague terror.

There were no flowers in the garden. The damp black soil gaped hungrily through the scanty, smoke-begrimed blades of grass. In the

centre of the plot a stunted thorn-tree, crippled by smoke and cold winds, was trying to send out a few tardy green leaves; and when the boy pressed his face eagerly against the hedge, it left patches of smut on his pink cheeks.

As far as his sight carried nothing met the eye but lead-roofed houses and smoking chimneys; the sky itself was shrouded and lost in the fumes rising from the coal-mines, where half-clad men were working all day in the dark. To the child, himself forest-born and bred, it was as yet scarcely clear where the town ended and the mines began—whether he lived still above ground or below. There were no birds nor flowers; but of course there could not be, he argued, since these cannot live without trees and brooks. If he wondered about it at all—which was seldom, because it frightened him almost as much as the old man in the green coat—it was to imagine that the blue sky and merry forests were where babies come from, and that the dingy town was a kind of dim, half-way land, where he was to wait until he was old enough to go down into the mines with the other boys.

Robin's best moments, now that he had left the babies, were when old Matthias came down into

his garden and twice a day brought, for a brief space, a magic vision from the woods and fields ; whilst Robin, his ruddy cheeks framed by the grimy yew hedge, would stare, wide-eyed with excitement, his red lips pursed as if preparing to whistle.

Matthias came solemnly down the verandah steps, until he reached the grass plot that did duty for a garden. Here he paused, his head thrown back as if he searched the four points of the sky for signs and wonders. Then he, too, like the child, pursed his lips, and began to whistle.

Now came the exciting time for Robin ! Not that there was anything tuneful or exhilarating in the weird articulations that came piercing through the old man's lips—the strange, broken, guttural sounds that rose gradually into short shrill notes, piercing, not by their loudness, but by their swiftness and clearness.

The child's eyes began to glisten. Already, to his expectant ears, there was a thrill of life in the heavy air, a faint beating of many wings obeying the incantation. Then a change came over the magician. All the grim lines in his worn countenance seemed to relax and melt in some miraculous return of youth to the sunken cheeks ; and over

the thin lips and hollow, suspicious eyes spread a strange, sweet smile of ineffable tenderness, as if in a vision he saw and beckoned to little children with the love of a father. The sharp cries turned into a gay chirping, like the chattering of bird to bird, or children's kisses echoing through spring woods. And whilst he whistled thus, weirdly enticing, he waved his arms rhythmically to and fro with gentle, soundless movements, scattering, as he did so, large handfuls of grain and bread on the grass around him.

As the fluttering of wings came nearer, it was like a shower of brown leaves falling from overhead. From every house-top, from every stunted tree in the long, straight street with its faded gardens, came flying sparrows and robins, with here and there a starling or house-martin, or a superior-looking grey pigeon from the church steeple. They fluttered round the old man, perching on his arms and shoulders, wheeling in a cloud round his head, hiding him in a whirring mass of wings. Then, at some occult signal, some potent wave of the long, green-clad arms, they flew with a rush and twitter to his feet, pecking like starved things at the scattered grain. And

all the time the magician seemed, metaphorically speaking, to embrace them with an unfathomable human love. It beamed in his tired face, in his gestures, in the tones of his voice as he chattered, in a half whisper, to his birds, reprimanding some for greed and quarrelsomeness, praising others for temperance and decorum, as if they were a flock of school-children.

It was at these moments that the child lost the half-delicious, half-fearful thrill down his spine that always made him hold his breath when Matthias appeared on his house-steps. He longed to obey the summons with the birds, only he knew that it was as much as his life was worth to disturb them at their feast! He had not forgotten how one day, when he had climbed on to a chair and suddenly poked his head above the hedge, the startled birds had flown in all directions, whilst the irate old man showered anathema after anathema upon his innocent soul. But what a good, kind face he showed to the birds! It was strange, thought the child, but it was such a young, young face, in spite of its wrinkles and the long, straggling white hair. When the eyes and lips smiled down on the fluttering, twittering birds, Robin felt, without knowing

why, that under that ugly, gaunt disguise lived a little happy child like himself.

The last crumb had vanished ; the hungry town-birds flashed away as they had come, darkening the air as with a swiftly passing cloud. The old man stood alone, the look of benignant love slowly fading, and the lines of crabbed old age sweeping away the fleeting return of youth.

Robin drew a long breath. His heart went out to the old man ; above all, it envied him those feathered playthings. What if he gathered up his courage and ran to him quickly before the smile had time to die into coldness ?

He pushed aside the thin branches, and skipped lightly and silently over the grass to where Matthias still stood in a kind of dream, staring over the chimney-tops. Robin, whose head barely reached the great green pockets, shuddered a little as he looked up at the bird-charmer ; then he raised his hand and touched his arm timidly.

Matthias turned upon him with a start of annoyance and surprise ; but before he had time to let loose a ready torrent of abuse, Robin intercepted him.

‘I am not naughty,’ he cried deprecatingly; ‘I am not cruel to the birds. I never throw stones at the birds.’

‘Then why are you here?’ asked Matthias coldly. ‘Go away. I hate boys. They are a curse on the face of the earth. I will not have boys daring to intrude in my garden. Go away.’

‘I am not a boy . . . not yet,’ disclaimed Robin, undaunted; ‘I am only a little boy . . . little boys *love* the birds, old man.’

‘Little boys make prisoners of the birds,’ answered Matthias grimly; ‘I hate little boys. Go away.’

The child shook his head and smiled.

‘What is it you want so badly?’ he asked inconsequently.

‘*Solitude!*’ thundered Matthias, and wrenched away his arm so violently that Robin found himself sitting at his feet in an undignified position, whence it seemed a very long way to the magician’s head. But having gone so far, he meant to brave it out to the end.

‘Is it more birds?’ he went on confidentially. ‘I will give you my bullfinch if it is that. They said you were wanting. But no one will tell me

what you want. If I knew, I would try and get it for you—I would truly, old man.'

'I want nothing,' answered Matthias, his anger suddenly appeased by the boy's confiding innocence. 'I have my birds. What more should I want? It is only when you boys come worrying the life out of my body that I am wanting. And then I want you to go.'

'Do you want *me* to go?'

Robin was looking up at him with his questioning blue eyes—eyes full of the occult wisdom of early childhood,—and whilst he spoke he pulled himself unceremoniously on to his feet by the help of the heavy green coat, and began patting the loosely hanging pockets to see if all the grain were gone. Matthias was too much astonished at the familiarity to answer. Robin twitched the coat impatiently.

'I say, do you want *me* to go, old man?' he repeated.

'Where is the bullfinch?' asked Matthias suddenly. 'When are you going to give it to me?'

Robin's eyes opened wider than ever. This speedy acceptance of his proffered treasure gave him a shock. But he would not go back upon his

own promise, so without a word he climbed solemnly and thoughtfully through the gap in the hedge and disappeared in the next-door house. Presently he came back again, labouring under a big wire cage, pressing his little cheek against the bars, whilst tears fell in slow, big drops over the precious sacrifice.

Matthias took the cage from him, and, opening the door, took the fluttering, well-fed bird into his hand, stroking its feathers lovingly with one finger.

‘Do you know what there is inside your bird?’ he asked slowly.

‘B-bird seed,’ sobbed Robin.

‘Shall I tell you?’ Matthias bent down to him, putting his mouth close to his ear. ‘Nobody knows it. It is a secret I discovered myself; that is why they come to me, and are afraid of great rough boys like you. Shall I tell you what is inside this bird of yours, little boy? Listen!’ he lowered his voice confidentially. ‘There is the soul of a little dead child. The souls of all the dead children turn into birds. That is what makes them sing. No other created things sing from birth to death, like the birds.’

‘What *is* a soul, old man?’

‘They say that no one knows. But I know that too. Souls are the flowers that blossom in human beings when they love any other human soul. Some of us have no souls, because we have no power of love within us. In others there is no soul, because the love they gave was killed by cruel fate. But wherever there is love there is a soul; and when the body it lives in dies, it flies into another world. Only when children die their souls come back to comfort us as birds.’

Suddenly his dreamy voice raised itself, and laying one hand heavily on Robin’s shoulder, he scanned his face.

‘You are a very wicked boy to shut up a poor little child’s soul in a cage,’ he said angrily. ‘You deserve to be in one yourself. Good God! if it should be Mavis or Dove——’

‘I love the birds too; I do truly, old man,’ said Robin penitently. ‘Suppose we let my soul-bird fly right away? Would that be good?’

Matthias spread open the palm of his hand where the bird crouched, its head huddled up in its ruffled feathers; and Robin, still weeping copiously, but buoyed up by a blessed sense of martyrdom, watched it gradually regaining courage, until at last with a

wild flutter of wings it soared up into the air and flew swiftly out of sight.

This valiant sacrifice on Robin's part became a bond of union between the child and the bird-charmer. Matthias let the boy watch him at the daily exercise of his spells, nodding to him as he peered through the hedge, and sometimes talking to him of the birds, discussing their various characteristics, or speculating on what this or that one had been before it assumed its bird-form. Robin learned, too, that amongst the birds came the souls of Mavis and Dove, of Philomel and Rossignol, and of one who had the same name as himself; and that it was for their sakes that the old man had become a charmer of birds.

Except for the moments when he fed the birds, Matthias never left his house. But sometimes sweet, mysterious sounds were wafted through the windows; long-drawn notes of wailing; passionate chords vibrating tremulously through the air; or the broken music that comes when fingers are passed at random over the strings of a musical instrument.

One day, overpowered by curiosity, Robin clambered up the steps, and opened the door of the

room, whence these sad, beautiful sounds were wandering.

The room was almost empty. The once polished boards were uncarpeted, and except for a few straight-backed chairs and six long-legged music-stands, there was absolutely no furniture. All round the walls hung violins of various sizes, each with its bow beside it, the wood of the instruments shining a ruddy brown as if newly rubbed and dusted.

Matthias sat in the middle of the room, his angular form bent over a great violoncello; and as he drew his bow over the strings, they sent forth the magical sounds that had excited Robin's curiosity. The boy's presence roused no comment; the old man went on absently drawing out the sonorous chords, pausing after each one until the rich, deep harmony had trembled into silence.

'Can you sing like this?' he asked presently.

Robin tossed back his head, and sang the notes after him in a small high voice, as clear and true as a bell.

'And like this?'

The merry voice ran lightly up the scale, then down again in a peal of laughter.

‘Why do you sit here with all these funny things?’ he asked, pointing to the violins. ‘Do they all talk like this?’—touching the ‘cello. ‘Have they got such great humming voices?’

‘Once they talked—not like this, though. No! If you heard them you would think you were going mad for joy. They could make the saddest music in the world . . . but that made no difference. When one heard it, it made one mad for joy.’

‘Will they make it now?’ cried Robin excitedly. ‘Will you try and make them speak, kind old man, and let me be mad for joy? What is mad for joy?’

Matthias shook his head.

‘I cannot make them speak. Only the Birds of the West could do that. You do not know who the Birds of the West were; but if they had lived all the world would have heard of them. They were Mavis and Dove, and Philomel and Rossignol, and Robin and— There were six of them. And these are their violins.’

He rose, and wandering dreamily round the room, touched each treasured instrument with lingering fingers. They were all that remained to him of the hope and ambition of years; the only

tangible memorial of the dead children he had firmly believed to be a family of youthful geniuses.

‘Were they all old men like you?’ questioned Robin.

‘No, they were all children . . . except the eldest . . . whom we never spoke of. She was the genius, the pride, the delight . . . but we never spoke of her, as I told you. But the others . . . he touched a child’s violin, from the neck of which hung gay blue and red ribbons. ‘This was Dove’s. She was the youngest, and we put on the ribbons to please her when she was ill. She died, you know, when she was a baby. But you had only to look at her eyes and her long narrow fingers to see that she would play like the others. And this I gave to Mavis the Christmas before she died. And this was the one Robin made merry songs and dances on; and on this Philomel played Bach—one would have said he had fifty fingers, that boy; but if Rossignol had not such technique, his was the velvet bow that stole away the heart out of one’s body.’

‘Is that all?’ murmured Robin, awed by the recital. ‘Were they all . . . witches and magicians?’

‘There was one more . . . there was Lynette,

who sang like an angel from heaven . . . the one we never spoke of. That is all. And now they are birds, and come to me to be fed, just as they used to when they were children. Five bird-souls of my own—Mavis and Dove, and Philomel and Rossignol, and merry Robin.'

'And Lynette, who you never speak of, but you do to-day?' asked the boy. 'Did her soul go to the birds too?'

'No,' answered Matthias roughly; 'her soul went to the devil!'

'Oh!' gasped Robin; then murmured, 'Once some one called mother Lynette; so I like Lynette, even if her soul is with the devil!'

'Who is your mother?'

'Mother.'

The old man made no reply. Absorbed in his memories, he had forgotten the child's presence. Robin moved reluctantly away, then paused with his hand on the door.

'Where has *your* soul gone to, old man?'

Matthias looked up with a fierce gleam in his eyes.

'You are a stupid little boy,' he said coldly. 'You ask nothing but questions, and sometimes

they are the questions of an idiot. Where should my soul be but in my body ?'

'Because she said—mother—that your soul was dead—because somebody—sorrow, or something like that, had killed it. And I wondered if it had gone into a raven, or a hawk, or a—'

'Go !' thundered Matthias ; 'I hate boys . . . never let me see your face here again.'

In spite of little misunderstandings of this sort, the odd friendship continued. It relieved the old man to be able to pour out his fancies to the but half-understanding child ; and to Robin, Matthias was a constant source of interest and wonder.

'Why do you hate boys ?' he asked him one day, whilst they stood watching the birds feed.

'Because they are cruel. They keep birds mewed up in cages, as you did—there is no foul cruelty a boy is not capable of. Then they mock me if they see me in the street. They little guess,' added Matthias, with a grim laugh, 'that if they died it would be to me they would come flocking, day after day, for food and love.'

'Do you hate them when they are boy-birds ?'

'I love all the birds,' murmured the old man. 'Philomel and Rossignol were boys . . . and Robin—'

‘Do you know, old man,’ said the child seriously, ‘I don’t believe they are here really and truly—Mavis and Philo—what’s-his-name?—and the others. I wouldn’t come and be a town-bird if I was dead; and I am a little child, so I ought to know.’

‘Not here?’ exclaimed Matthias; ‘where, then?’

‘I would go to the forests, where the real birds are. Did you ever go to the forests? Often and often I ask mother to take me back there; and then she says, “Wait till the old man comes with you.” Will you soon come?’

‘What’s that?’

A stone came flying across the garden and fell at their feet, followed by another and another, whilst boys’ voices came rudely disturbing the silence.

‘There’s the wizard at his games. Let’s see what they’re made of, his birds.’

‘Boys!’ cried Matthias, raising his stick, whilst the blood flooded to his forehead. ‘Cursed boys!’

He stumbled blindly forward, trembling with rage at the attempted massacre of his beloved birds, but the effort was too great for him. A burning giddiness made his head reel, and suddenly he fell face forwards on the grass, where Robin stood crying bitterly above him.

II

It was early morning when Matthias woke. A thin bright sun filtered through the yellow blinds into his room, and danced in white patterns on the dull green coat hanging over the door. Even in this smoky region there was some of the swiftness of spring in the air; a sense of fragrance, though there were no flowers; of birds' voices to ears expectant of lark and cuckoo.

How long he had slept he had no idea; though he had a dim consciousness of lying there for many, many hours of silent solitude, broken only at rare intervals by a child's figure creeping up to his bedside carrying milk and rolls.

Beyond that everything was a blank. Why was he ill? What had happened? How long had he been there? Were the birds—ah! yes, the birds! Suddenly he started up from his pillow, and began fumbling for his clothes. The birds had been left hungry and neglected whilst he lay

sleeping like a pampered fox, forgetful and careless. His thin hands began to tremble as he thought of them—the precious birds—and of how they must have hovered round the garden, beating their wings and calling to him in vain; perhaps even believing in their tiny souls that he had in truth forgotten or grown callous—those beloved, tiny souls amongst whom, without doubt, fluttered Robin and Mavis, and Philomel, and Rossignol, and Dove who had died young.

He dragged himself to the window and looked out. The crooked thorn-tree had put forth all its leaves in the last few days, and the sprouting hedge was speckled all over with flecks of vivid young green. A soft wild wind scattered the smoke from the endless chimneys, and on the horizon, almost clear, for once, in the morning light, lay the distant hills and forests.

A sense of well-being came to the old man. His heart was swelling with love and kindness towards the little creatures he tended, as he took down the grotesque green coat from the peg, and crammed its bulgy pockets with grain and bread.

His illness had left him curiously weak. It was exhausting to him to struggle into the heavy coat,

and by the time he had stepped on to the verandah, his knees tottered under him like those of a child learning to walk. Well, the birds would have to come to him there, as they did in the winter, hopping up and down the grain-covered steps, or perching close to him on the rusty railing. Surely already they were coming! Was not that the swish of scores of little wings sweeping through the air? He could see the well-known flock—like a small cloud darkening the morning—as the birds flew from far and near over the roof-tops and up from the narrow streets. And exulting in his power over them, in the magnetism that drew them back to him by the mere exercise of thought, he stood motionless, no sound passing his lips, but the smile of welcome spreading over his face as he watched them sweep over his garden, wheel round in an excited circle, then suddenly swoop down, just out of his sight, beyond the straggling hedge.

They had not seen him. The neglect of the past days had prepared them for disappointment. In another moment the little living cloud would darken past him again, to disappear mysteriously under eaves and in dim, black corners until evening.

He began whistling softly.

He could still see the birds rising now and again with a flutter above the hedge, then falling again, with the familiar impetuous rush, upon some object or objects invisible to him.

He whistled louder—changing to the strange wild notes he used when the spell was at its height—waving his arms, and slowly scattering the grain.

One or two birds flew to him at the summons, hopping up the steps and pecking greedily at the food. But beyond these—nothing.

The smile faded from Matthias's face. He looked suddenly as old as the hills, grey and anxious, with an odd fear in his eyes. Had his illness deprived him of his power? he wondered. Or were the birds so fickle and shy that after a few days' absence all the taming had to be done laboriously over again from the beginning? The notes broke from him now with shrill yearning—eager, piercing, anguished, as the cries of a bird when a hawk sweeps down upon her nest.

But the charm had lost its power. There was no response. He might as well have called to the four winds.

Then, all at once, a light burst upon his mind.

He crept stealthily down the steps, supporting his feeble body on the thin railing, and pausing every moment to recover breath. More than once he was nearly overcome by horrible faintness; but, undefeated, he struggled on until he reached a spot where he could see over the hedge into his neighbour's garden.

Then he saw that what he had suspected was true.

A little child sat cross-legged on the grass. His head, haloed by close golden curls, was flung back with a childish assumption of inspiration; his dancing eyes searched the heavens for signs and wonders; and as he waved his arms slowly to and fro with rhythmical gestures full of indolent grace, there came through his pursed lips, red as roses, the sweetest, clearest whistling possible to imagine. All the quaint notes of the old man's magic were made human and melodious as they rose from the boy's merry heart. Gesture, expression, intonation—all were copied from Matthias with absolute faithfulness; the imitation was as exact as it was possible to be where one was aged seventy and the other five years old.

Matthias made neither sound nor movement to

betray his presence, but, as if rooted to the spot, gazed with a kind of fascination until the feast was over and the birds had flown away, and the child was left alone dancing with delight on the grass, clapping his hands with glee at the success of his charms.

Stolen !

God had stolen Mavis and Dove, and the others ; and now this child had stolen from him the birds. He had wormed himself into the old man's favour, only to learn his secrets and turn them into cruel weapons against him. The very spells which Matthias had acquired with so much labour and such patient devotion to his task seemed no longer to belong to him, but to have passed into the possession of this child, who had made them his by an added grace and innocence. Though Matthias recognised the innocence, it was but with the unreasoning hatred born of jealousy ; and all that day as he sat brooding in his melancholy room, hung round with the long-silent violins, there was murder raging in his heart.

His mind was possessed by the one thought : wherever he turned his eyes, the vision met them of Robin sitting with his curly head thrown back,

whistling amongst the birds—Matthias's birds, who for the first time had been deaf to his summons. It never occurred to his wandering wits to circumvent the little traitor by coming first into the field. His whole manner of regarding the birds, and his love for them, had in it something of the mystic's fervent unreason. They were the one joy left to him through which he could find an outlet for the somewhat abnormal capacity for affection that the death of the 'Birds of the West' had distorted into mania. That his power over them should fail once was an omen that it was gone for ever; he had no heart nor courage to resist so terrible a fate by the natural means that would have suggested themselves to a saner mind. The child, whose naïve prattlings had almost won him a way into Matthias's heart, seemed to him, now, to be only some strangely cunning device by which the evil spirit who had robbed him of his children was robbing him also of his birds. Before, the spirit had come in vague, intangible forms—fevers and languors and the fatal cough; but now at last it had taken human guise; and though it had lodged itself in the form of a child, innocent and lovely to the eye as a field flower, it must die.

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The long spring evening was over. Towards sunset Matthias had stolen down to the garden, and, silent as a statue but for his anguished breathing and the tumultuous beating of his heart, had listened to Robin's sweet whistling, and watched the flight of the birds from dim street and alley. And as he saw the child sitting there so happily amongst them, like a little Eros tended by his mother's doves, hatred and jealousy surged so passionately within him that it was only by pressing his hands over his lips that he could check the fierce cries of rage that tore his breast.

But it was nearly over. To-night the evil spirit should be slain, and the pure soul of the child would soar away to enter into the body of a bird. If he was committing a crime, he was also saving a soul; so he argued in the rare moments of connected thought when he was not given over heart and soul to his dream of vengeance.

So, once more, after the sun had set, and when night had settled over the smoke-swathed town, he crept down his steps into the garden, stealing, like a thief in the night, over the grass plot to the gap in the tall, scraggy hedge. As he pushed aside the branches a slight shudder ran over him.

He seemed to see the boy's face, with its wise, questioning eyes, looking up at him in a gentle reproach that made his heart stop beating with terror at the thing he was about to do.

'I love the birds,' the clear treble voice seemed to ring through the silence; 'I do truly, old man.'

'Mavis and Dove and Robin, and Philomel and Rossignol,' murmured Matthias in a hoarse whisper, speaking the names slowly, like an exorcism. 'They were mine . . . and they came back to me with the wings of birds. You have stolen them from me . . . Mavis and Dove and Philo——'

The vision faded; and he passed on, clinging to the shadow under the wall of the house.

The door was not yet locked for the night. It opened readily to his touch, turning noiselessly on its hinges, without a creak; and in another moment he stood on the threshold of the little sleeping-room. This door, too, was ajar, though the room was in darkness, except for a low flicker from a night-light in one corner. Evidently the boy was in bed; and though no one seemed to be moving, Matthias knew that some one was with him, for a woman's voice rose, singing a soft little lullaby.

'Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dying moon, and blow,
Blow him again to me ;
While my little one, while my pretty one, sleeps.'

The voice, low and droning, came to Matthias like one heard in a dream, strange, and yet familiar ; and as it rose and fell in sweet cadences, memories from long ago poured into his brain.

'Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the Western sea. . . .'

He closed his eyes with a long sigh.

There was Dove, falling asleep in her little white-curtained cot, and a woman bending over her crooning a lullaby. And near by Lynette. . . .

'Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.'

The voice ceased. A door at the other end of the room closed ; and he was alone with his little victim.

Matthias groped his way through the dim light up to the bedside.

The child was asleep, curled up like a little kitten, with his hands tucked under his chin. Long black lashes cast a shadow under his eyes ; and his cheeks, in the darkness, looked like delicate

ivory. Lying thus, with all his boyish life and vigour at rest, the spirituality of childhood hung over him like a lovely essence.

It was thus Dove had looked, and Mavis—Mavis, who always slept with her two hands curled under her chin. And thus Lynette's eyelashes had fallen, making heavy shadows under her eyes . . . and just so Lynette's under lip had thrust itself over the upper, with a sweet little rebellious curve.

Matthias clasped his head with both hands. His brain reeled. Why should the ghosts of his lost children rise up before him now, in the very shape and likeness of the child he hated with all the bitterness of jealousy? And Lynette—of whom he never spoke . . . strange indeed that an echo of Lynette's voice should have sung that lullaby over the boy! No voice was ever so true and pure as Lynette's, or fell upon the ear with such softly dying cadences; 'whisperings from her soul,' some one had once called them. Ah! the children. How he had gloried in their beauty, their wit, their wild mirth, and in the rare musical genius that had burned away their lives, one by one! What were the birds to him, who had known

what it was to cherish little living and loving human creatures who called him father?

‘Silver sails all out of the West
Under the silver moon :
Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.’

From the next room he could still hear the woman’s voice crooning the old lullaby—a voice from the past, fraught with passionate memories—a voice that pierced him like a sword.

And suddenly, something seemed to burst in his heart and brain—like the breaking up of a great sorrow, or as if a lightning-flash had burned away the cloud of darkness that for years had dimmed his sight.

He sank on his knees by the bed, and flinging his gaunt, tired arms round the sleeping child, knew that the spirit to whom he would have brought death had brought to him—life.

Early next morning Robin and Matthias stood side by side scattering grain to the birds that hovered in a cloud around them. And when summer came Lynette carried them away from the town and let them roam together, hand in hand, through the forest, ‘where the real birds live.’





A CAPRICCIO



A CAPRICCIO

CHAPTER I

MY GALLANT CAVALIER

‘So this is London? Well, I do not see anything so very wonderful, Aunt Rebecca. It is only very noisy and dreary. I suppose it is market-day, as it is so crowded, and every one seems to be in such a hurry?’

Aunt Rebecca frowned disapprovingly, glanced uneasily at our neighbours, then whispered to me not to chatter like an ignorant schoolgirl.

I was in London for the first time in my life. It is many, many years ago now, but none the less vividly do I recollect my first impressions of our great city, and my disappointment that there were no gorgeous palaces such as I had expected to see; for I was as unsophisticated a little rustic as it was possible for a girl of eighteen to be, even in those

days when travelling was neither so easy nor so cheap as it is now.

I, Celia Random, had lived all those eighteen years at our quiet country home, amongst pleasant meadow-lands and golden corn-fields.

My father died when I was a child, and the family now consisted of my dear, good mother, my maiden aunt, Rebecca, my sisters, Maisie and Tottie, and of six great romping brothers, who grew out of their clothes with lamentable rapidity, and kept the house in a constant state of excitement. A happier family could not have been found in the kingdom. Troubles seemed to pass us by, or, if they came, fell with a lighter touch on us than on other folk, and life shone like gold before our eager eyes.

But such a large family could not thrive upon nothing, and when I was considered to have reached years of discretion, it was arranged that I should try and earn something to help the boys' education, by going out as a 'lady's companion.'

That the thought was terrible to me I will not deny. But the boys must be educated, and I was always ready to do anything for those I loved. So my fate was sealed. My mother wrote to all

her friends to inquire if they knew of any situation likely to suit me, or that I should suit; and, as a last great treat, Aunt Rebecca said she would take me to London for a fortnight, that I might have a glimpse of the great world before I left my liberty and my home behind me.

I was full of excitement when we at last reached London in the great, lumbering stage-coach. What a weary journey it had been, and how glad we were to know that it was over! We were staying with a bachelor cousin of Aunt Rebecca's, who had a small house in a fashionable quarter of the town, and who did his best to make us comfortable. He was a business man, who spent all his spare time at his club, so that we saw but little of him and had to find our own amusements. Not that we minded his absence. On the contrary, we rejoiced in our freedom, and in the knowledge that there was no cockney at hand to jeer at our ignorance, and at our naïve delight in things that were everyday matters to him. Aunt Rebecca delighted in acting cicerone, and promised to show me all the sights and wonders. Indeed, she drew up a lengthy plan of campaign for each day, and was, I verily believe, almost as eager and

excited as I was myself. However, when it came to actions, her courage failed her somewhat; and we did little the first day but wonder at the shops, the crowds, the bustle and hurry; and I was beginning to feel just a little disappointed, when our host, Mr. Greville, came and asked us if we would go with him to the theatre that night.

‘Oh yes,’ I cried, clapping my hands; ‘oh, how beautiful!’ But Aunt Rebecca drew herself up and pursed her lips.

‘I am not sure that it is correct for young girls to go to such entertainments,’ she said; ‘not at all sure, my dear.’

‘Tut, tut! Let the child go. Every one goes,’ said Mr. Greville. ‘Come now, Rebecca, I’ve settled it all, and go you must.’

So we went; and whether it was correct or not for a young girl, I know not. But this I do know: that for one night, at least, I was in Elysium, and that if it had not been for Uncle Greville taking us to the theatre that night, this story had never been written.

For we had a little adventure, Aunt Rebecca and I, that I laugh even now to think of.

I thought that play the most beautiful thing I had ever witnessed. The lights, the gorgeous scenery and dresses, the sparkling beauty and vivacity of the actresses, fairly intoxicated me. I gazed open-mouthed, weeping silently during the tragic parts, and laughing so openly at every jest, that Aunt Rebecca at last felt it her duty to reprove me for my levity.

Nor was I much less interested between the acts. It was like reading a story-book to watch the different people around me—from the gay ladies with their beaux in the boxes, to the rougher audience in the pit,—and to guess at their respective histories. I was deeply engaged thus, looking about me, when Aunt Rebecca touched my arm with her hand, and I heard a piteous whisper of—

‘Celia, my dear.’

Poor Aunt Rebecca! Her face was the picture of misery as she sat stiffly staring in front of her, like one turned into wood. I could not think what was the matter with her, and was just going to inquire if she felt ill, when she continued, in the same agonised tone, and still staring fixedly—

‘I cannot move, Celia. Is it not a young man?’

‘What? who? where?’ I asked, bewildered.

‘On my head,’ she replied sepulchrally.

Then I perceived what had happened. A young man occupied the seat behind Aunt Rebecca. During the *entr'acte* he had turned round to look about him, and, either in absence of mind or with intentional rudeness, had leant against the back of her stall. Now Aunt Rebecca dressed her hair in a peculiar long roll behind, rather like a broad sausage; over the sausage she wore a turban with long ends; and on this sausage and on the ends of this turban, the young man was calmly sitting, holding the good lady in a vice, so that she could turn neither to the right nor to the left.

Uncle Greville was soundly asleep; nothing but a firmly administered kick would have roused him, and this Aunt Rebecca was too timid and too genteel to bestow. How, then, was she to be released?

‘What shall I do, Celia?’ she murmured. ‘I shall be strangled.’

‘I will tell him,’ I said. ‘I will tell him that he is very rude and underbred.’

‘What is he like, Celia?’

I took a longer look at the young man. He

was tall and slim, with a boyish face full of such chivalry that my courage rose, and I felt no fear of my action being misconstrued. Touching him on the shoulder, I said clearly, but timidly—

‘Please, sir, would you mind moving?’

He sprang up, and looked round in surprise. Then his face clouded with genuine distress.

‘I beg your pardon, madam,’ he said, bowing with that old-world courtesy that is dying out so quickly; ‘I was not aware—indeed I had no idea of what I was doing. I was forgetful. What can I say to excuse myself? I beg your pardon a thousand times.’

Aunt Rebecca bowed, blushed, and murmured—

‘Not at all—I am sure—pray don’t mention it.’

I could see that the young man was quite overcome with annoyance at what he had done. His eyes met mine and seemed to say so plainly, ‘It was unintentional. *You* will believe me,’ that my heart went out to him, and I smiled and nodded as if to reassure him that it was all right now. Then I blushed, not quite sure if Aunt Rebecca would approve of such familiarity, and did not turn my head round again for the rest of the evening.

But as we were leaving the theatre the young man was once more thrown in our way.

Mr. Greville had enough to do in guiding Aunt Rebecca through the crowd without troubling about me. I had to fight my way as best I could, and presently I found myself separated from my companions by a sea of heads. It was all so new to me that I was getting bewildered and a little frightened, when a friendly voice said in my ear—

‘You are alone. May I not be of service to you?’ And looking up, I saw the young man holding out his arm to me with such a frank smile on his handsome face, that indeed I could not resist his offer.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said flurriedly; ‘I have lost Aunt Rebecca.’

He piloted me safely through the crowd, looking down at me once or twice with a half smile, but not speaking. I could understand that it was his delicacy of feeling that kept him silent. As I afterwards learned, he was such a gentleman in words, thoughts, and deeds.

When we reached Aunt Rebecca I let go his arm and dropped him a little curtsy, and wondered,

even then, if I should ever see him again. Then, to my surprise, I saw Mr. Greville clap him on the shoulder with a hearty—

‘Bravo, my lord! So you have tracked my little partridge,’ adding something in a lower tone and laughing.

‘May I be introduced?’ asked the young man.

‘Certainly, certainly. Bless me! Rebecca, Rebecca; Lord Everril—son of our old friend—wishes to be introduced to you.’

Whereupon the young man bowed, and Aunt Rebecca curtsied and told him that she had known his father and mother intimately, and that she remembered him as a baby.

It was such a balmy night that we decided to walk home; and somehow it came to pass that when Mr. Greville and Aunt Rebecca started off together arm-in-arm, I found Lord Everril still by my side.

‘May I walk back with you?’ he had asked Aunt Rebecca, with one of his quick smiles. ‘For old acquaintance’ sake?’

But instead of escorting the maiden aunt, he had fallen back on the niece.

He was so unlike the men I met at home—so

fashionable, so handsome, so courteous, that I was almost too shy to talk at first. But by degrees his genial manners thawed my constraint, and I found myself chattering away quite merrily. I told him all about home, about the boys, and how this was my first visit to London, and that I had never been to any gaieties in my life.

‘Have you a wish for gaieties?’ he asked suddenly. ‘Now, for instance, would you care to go to the great ball on Friday night at the Duchess of R——’s?’

‘*Care!*’ I cried, clasping my hands. ‘Oh—but it is impossible.’

‘Not a bit. I can easily manage it,’ he said eagerly. ‘Only promise me that if you are invited you will come.’

I shook my head.

‘I have nothing to wear—nothing smart. Do you not see how old-fashioned I am? And this is my best frock.’

‘Your friend Mr. Greville will see to that. Or stay! Come as you are,’ he answered. ‘That also must be a promise. And there is one other I would ask you to give me. May I?’

‘I am not afraid.’

'Promise to dance with me twice, thrice, four times on Friday.'

'Why, that is easily promised,' I said simply. 'I will dance with you as often as you like, for there will be no one else to ask me. But you have not Aunt Rebecca's permission yet; and I cannot be sure that she will let me go.'

But here our conversation ceased. We had arrived at Mr. Greville's house, and he insisted on making Lord Everril come in to have some supper. (I wonder what my mother would have said to our eating at that hour of night!)

Lord Everril did not speak again to me, except to say good-night. Instead, he devoted himself to Aunt Rebecca, and made himself so pleasant that, as she afterwards confessed, she could deny him nothing.

'Such a gentlemanly young man,' she said, when we were going to bed, as she interrupted my rhapsodies about the play: 'so courteous, so agreeable, and as well-favoured as one could wish to see. I hope I have done right, my dear, and that such vanities will not turn your head. He begged so prettily that I could not say him nay.'

'The ball? O Aunt Rebecca! Aunt Rebecca!

Did you say yes? Are we going to it? Really—*really* going? O you dear, good, darling old auntie!

I danced round the room until I was giddy; then dropped on my knees and laid my whirling head on her lap. It seemed too good to be true.

‘Now, if you are so foolish, Celia, I shall feel it my duty to say no,’ said Aunt Rebecca, in her prim, old-maid voice, though a smile hovered round her mouth. ‘Remember that young men are not all to be trusted. And “Beauty is but skin deep.”’

‘Yes,’ I said critically; ‘he has a beautiful face, and if he is not to be trusted, it will not hurt us, Aunt Rebecca. Oh, and he says I am to wear this gown at the ball.’

‘Vanity is a sin, my dear,’ went on Aunt Rebecca, rising. ‘It is time you were asleep; and remember, when you feel in danger of being overcome by vanity—remember, “Beauty is but skin deep.”’

Before I undressed, I took one look at myself in the glass. I do not know why I did so, unless it was the effect of Aunt Rebecca’s words. At all events, there was no fear of vanity overcoming me, I thought, for this is all I saw: a tall, slim figure,

in a straight, high-waisted, white frock ; a laughing face, with pink cheeks ; merry eyes, dark, like sloes ; and a wealth of brown hair, short and curly as a boy's. Nothing there to warrant Aunt Rebecca's warning that 'Beauty is but skin deep.'

CHAPTER II

SMILES

My first ball! How well I remember it; the excitement and trepidation; the wonder if I should dance, or be doomed to help swell the ranks of forlorn damsels who stand in a formidable line along the wall, smiling sweetly, though their charms be passed by, and in their secret hearts sadly conscious that, as far as dancing is concerned, they might just as well be in bed and asleep.

Aunt Rebecca was far more sanguine in her expectations of enjoyment than I was. In her young days she had received a good deal of admiration, and, though she was now over forty, I think the good soul fondly imagined that she would find things just as they had been fifteen years ago. Whilst, in her affection for me, she assured me that I should be 'a vast success,' and that I should have no lack of partners.

I had my doubts; but, whatever befell, I was confident of enjoying myself, if only as an on-looker; and I feel certain that, when we arrived in the ball-room, no two people looked happier than we did. Indeed, Aunt Rebecca's face was wreathed in smiles, and she kept tapping my shoulder with her fan, saying delightedly—

‘To think of it, my dear—to think of it! What would your mother say if she could see us now?’

There were a great many beautiful women and young girls; dressed, alas! so differently from me, and looking so much at home and at ease, as though they were quite accustomed to it all, as I suppose they were. I began to feel ashamed of my own simple, old-fashioned garments, and of my boyish curls, and fancied that all these other girls must be talking of and simpering at my rusticity. Some of the gentlemen, too, stared, then whispered together with stolen glances at me, until I was so overcome by shyness and false shame that all my hopes of enjoyment began to fade.

‘We shall not know any one here, auntie,’ I said at last. ‘Cannot we find a corner in which to hide ourselves? People stare so.’

‘Now, didn’t I tell you so?’ she replied, looking so provokingly happy that I could almost have believed she *liked* being stared at. ‘Hide ourselves? Why, Celia, you are not ashamed of your pretty, simple gown?’

‘Oh no. I am very happy. I am, indeed,’ I answered quickly, with some compunction for my foolish self-consciousness. ‘I know we could not afford to be better dressed. But——’

Well, I need not have cared how I looked, for, after all, it was more than probable that no one took the trouble to notice either me or my clothes. Remembering this, I felt quite happy again, and was soon wrapt up in the, to me, novel sight, when suddenly Aunt Rebecca’s fan came down on my shoulder with an energy that denoted an increased delight and agitation on her part.

‘Ah, my dear, there he is,’ she whispered eagerly. ‘Now, did you ever see such a well-favoured, gallant young fellow before? Hold up your head, dear Celia, and do not drop your fan about in such an awkward way. Wave it gently; wave it gently.’

Before I had accomplished this delicate feat, Lord Everril joined us and expressed his pleasure at seeing us again.

‘And now, Miss Celia, may I have this dance?’ he asked, after having spoken a little with Aunt Rebecca: ‘or are you very deeply engaged—as indeed you must be?’

‘Engaged? No,’ I replied. ‘We know nobody here, Aunt Rebecca and I, and nobody knows us.’

‘Ah! We will soon remedy that,’ he said, leading me away, ‘for I have already been asked by several people if I could tell them the name of the young lady in white.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said I, looking disconsolately at my old-fashioned clinging skirts; ‘we must look very—odd—amongst all these beautiful people in their beautiful dresses. But all the same it is very rude of them to stare and make remarks.’

Lord Everril laughed, and answered, with an amused glance at my doleful face: ‘Why, do you not know that it is the charms that——’ he paused, muttering something to himself about ‘folly to be wise,’ then went on in a more careless voice: ‘Well, they can say nothing but good of you. And your gown is ravishing. We do not often see the unpainted lily here; and as for me, I prefer the flower in its native purity to the gaudy counterfeit

that cannot bare its face to daylight. Shall we dance ?'

We danced, then talked, then danced again, and once more talked, until I suddenly remembered Aunt Rebecca, and bethought me that she might be vexed and lonely if I stayed away so long. But Lord Everril assured me that he had seen her deep in reminiscences with an old friend whom she had not met for years ; so I willingly continued to dance, and presently allowed my companion to lead me out on to the balcony. The great ever-wakeful town lay before us, all twinkling with lights, and looking something like that marvellous city of which I had dreamed before I came to London to find, like Dick Whittington, that my El Dorado is but an enormous, foggy, and unromantic town after all.

'So this is your first flight into the world ?' asked Lord Everril, after I had said something of this. 'Tell me about your home.'

'I have told you all. Are you not tired of hearing ? We lead such quiet lives. But, oh ! if you knew what happy times we have together ; we and the boys, and Madge, and Dick Somers.'

'Who is Dick Somers ?'



‘Dick? He is our greatest friend. In all our merry times it is Dick who makes us most merry and happy.’

‘Ah, the hero of your home,’ he said, looking at me intently. ‘Some village Adonis in fustian, with the strength and appetite of a bear, and prominent feet.’

‘Dick a hero? If you knew him you could not say that. No, Dick is only the scapegoat of our village, who leads all the other boys into mischief. But he is very good at heart, and we have played together since we were all babies in the nursery.’

‘I was beginning to think he might be more than a friend. Will you believe me if I tell you that I was almost ready to hate him and to feel that——’ He checked himself, with a half-impatient look at my puzzled face; then added: ‘Come, you do not understand me, and I was talking nonsense. How long shall you stay in London?’

‘Until Saturday,’ I replied. ‘After that I am going home again for a little while before I have to go away for good. This is a treat to make up for the dull life that is coming.’

‘Why dull? Surely you are not one of those

people who always expect the future to be full of trouble? Do you mean that you are going to leave home?

‘Yes. I am going to be a “lady’s companion,”’ I answered demurely, stealing a glance at Lord Everril to see how he liked this announcement, and whether he appeared ashamed of me now that he knew that I was going to work for my living. ‘Mother is looking out for a situation, for she says that I am old enough now to be useful.’

‘You shall not!’ exclaimed Lord Everril. ‘You are too young and too bright to become the slave of an ill-tempered old woman. You are an Amaryllis, meant to enjoy a life of freedom in sunlit meadows, with roses under your feet, and no cares to trouble yourself with from day’s end to day’s end.’

‘But you know we are very poor,’ I said simply, ‘and there are the little ones growing up. I must help mother if I can, and take some of the care off her shoulders. Ah, you do not know what poverty means.’

‘Do I not? I am poor myself,’ he replied; ‘next door to the workhouse.’

I laughed sceptically, and shook my head. To

me, who had known all my life what it is to be one of a large family living on a few hundreds a year, it sounded a little ridiculous to hear this young man, who looked as if he had been born with half a dozen golden spoons in his mouth, talking seriously of being in want of money.

‘You do not believe me?’ he said. ‘But it is true. My uncle—whom my father succeeded to the title—left all his money to his only child, a girl; so that *we* are plagued with his name whilst *she* has the pleasure of spending his money. Consequently, here I am with barely enough to clothe myself with, whilst, what is far worse, it is supposed that the “honour of the Everrils” is in my hands, and that I was sent into the world for the sole purpose of retrieving the family fortunes.’

‘Oh, then you too will have to work,’ said I innocently. ‘What are you going to do? I know some one who has gone out to America to make his fortune; but perhaps you would dislike leaving England. What do they want you to do?’

‘Well, they have already chosen my profession for me. A nice, honourable, gentlemanly profession—no vulgarity in it—and warranted not to

wear one out with hard labour. It is the profession of heiress-hunting, which perhaps you have never heard of.'

He spoke with unconcealed bitterness, and after a moment's pause went on rather urgently.

'What would *you* do if your mother and half a hundred devoted relations were constantly imploring you, on bended knees, to accept £20,000 per annum from a beautiful cousin, *only* ten years your senior, saying that it is the only way of preventing the family name from falling into the gutter, and from dying out in ignominious pauperism? Of all curses, preserve me from a family name without family plate to uphold its dignity. Tell me, what would *you* do?'

'If I cared for the beautiful cousin, I should not be too proud to accept everything she liked to give me,' I replied, hesitating lest I should say too much. 'But if I did not care for her, I would take nothing; it would be like a coward.'

'You are right. And I do not care for her. Let us forget her. Miss Celia, if I hear of an old and respectable lady who wants a companion, may I tell her of you?'

'It will be very kind of you,' I said. 'Now, will

you take me back to Aunt Rebecca? She must be tired of waiting for me.'

So she was, though she tried not to show it, and insisted on waiting until after I had danced with two elegant young men who were now introduced to me, and who seemed to have very small conversational powers—for one never soared beyond the weather, which we beat round on all sides; and the other evidently felt it to be his mission to persuade me that I was Venus, Helen of Troy, Titania, and the Belle of the present ball, all in one, and that he had never before felt his heart so stirred with emotion. All of which I had heard him say, shortly before, to a young lady with damp-looking curls and teeth like a post and rails, as Dick would have said; so that I was not much elated by the flattery.

After that Lord Everril took Aunt Rebecca to supper, and helped us on with our cloaks. And as he put mine over my shoulders he said, in a tone that made me blush and tremble for no reason, like a foolish schoolgirl—

‘This has been the happiest evening I have ever spent, Amaryllis. I shall remember it all my life. Have *you* enjoyed it too, I wonder?’

‘Oh, so much! I shall never, never forget it,’ I said, letting my hand rest for a moment in his, and looking up into his kind, handsome face. ‘And you have been so good to us. Good night, Lord Everil.’

‘Good night; may I come and see you to-morrow? Thank you; I shall come without fail. You will be gone next week. And I shall hardly know how to get on without—your Aunt Rebecca.’

I slept very little that night. I was so much excited that strains of dance-music haunted my dreams and awoke me when it was yet early. Aunt Rebecca, on the contrary, slept the long sleep of exhaustion, until, in my impatience to talk over the events of the night before, I longed to awake her by fair means or foul, and was only deterred from doing so by the reflection that it might spoil her temper for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER III

KISSES

‘So you are really going home to-morrow, and this is the last time we shall meet, for goodness knows how long?’ said Lord Everril. ‘Are you sorry, Miss Celia, or are “home” and “Dick Somers” superior attractions. I—we shall all miss you here.’

We were sitting together near the window. Aunt Rebecca had complained of feeling chilly, which was strange, considering that it was one of those stifling July days when no one and no thing—if we except flies—seems capable of stirring. I was afraid she must be feverish, and offered to mix her a cooling beverage; but she repelled my advances, and sent me back to where Lord Everril was sitting by the open window, idly pulling to pieces the begrimed leaves that straggled through it. We had no view beyond the crowded street, and there was a din of equipages in our ears that was scarcely the fitting accompaniment to soft speeches. But

as far as we were concerned externals were of small account ; to our eager eyes the horizon was boundless, the landscape aglow with sunshine and the glory of love and hope.

‘Sorry !’ I answered. ‘Of course I am ; very sorry indeed. Even home will seem a little monotonous now.’

‘I wonder if you will remember me if ever we meet again ?’ he went on. ‘You will perhaps be married by then.’

‘Most likely,’ I said carelessly. ‘And you, too. We shall be two elderly and sedate personages, taking snuff, and always falling asleep, like Aunt Rebecca, after dinner.’

I was determined not to reveal how sore my heart was at the prospect my own words held out to me. Lord Everril had never spoken a word of love to me, and it was no fault of his if I felt that no man could ever again fill the place that he had stolen in my heart.

He turned his face from me and began to speak gravely.

‘You remember what I told you about my cousin and my own future prospects, or rather non-prospects.’

‘Yes,’ I assented, yawning. ‘Have you *done it* yet?’

‘Not yet,’ he said, with a suppressed smile. ‘But I am expected to do so without delay. In fact, I am half-distracted. What is it my duty to do? Ought I to sacrifice myself for my mother, my family, and to keep up the old name—hang it! Or shall I go my own way, break my mother’s heart, and let the world forget there ever was such a name as Everril? Remember I am the last of the race. If I had a son, he would, of course, succeed to the title, but to a yearly income of no more than a few hundred pounds. For myself, I don’t care a straw about family honours, and think them more bother than they are worth. But it seems selfish to cause real pain to so many people. It was my father’s last wish that I and my cousin should marry. In fact, he almost bound me by a promise.’

‘Is she nice, your cousin?’

‘Charming. But unfortunately she has her caprices. One of them is that she imagines herself to be in love with your humble servant. She has ideas in her head, and looks upon a *mariage-de-convenance* as the correct thing; and has even, to

accomplish her end, declared that unless I marry her or the girl she selects for me, she will leave all her money to the greatest brute of a fellow that ever lived. There is a nice look-out !'

'But if she is so charming,' I exclaimed aghast, 'how could she ask you to marry her?'

'Well, she did not do it in so many words. But there are roundabout ways of doing things of which you, Amaryllis, in your simplicity, know nothing. It is a kind of understood affair. Besides, I would rather marry my cousin than the alternative she has offered me, and she knows it. Now, advise me.'

'I suppose family pride and honour, and all that, are something like what I feel for my own little home,' I replied, and my voice sounded very thin and silly and weak. 'And if we had to let that fall into the hands of some one we disliked—oh, it would break our hearts to think of what my father would have felt. Then for your mother it must be even worse, Lord Everril. And I think if you like your cousin, and she is so—so charming, you ought to marry her, and make every one happy.'

'Thank you. Your advice savours of worldly wisdom,' he said slowly; and left me with a frown

on his face, to join Aunt Rebecca at the other end of the room.

I supposed that unintentionally I had offended him. Men are always going off at a tangent; after all, I had only tried to be wise and brave. True love, I told myself, should be unselfish, or it is worth nothing. Why! what was that dropping down my cheek? Was it beginning to rain, or could it be a tear that watered the creeper with salt drops? I stamped my foot, gulped back a sob, and began to sing some merry ballad, though my voice seemed to come from my shoes, and instead of the lively words, I could only think of one doleful little speech, 'Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Miss Celia,' echoed a low voice presently. 'You seem very happy.'

I turned, and held out my hand, unable to answer.

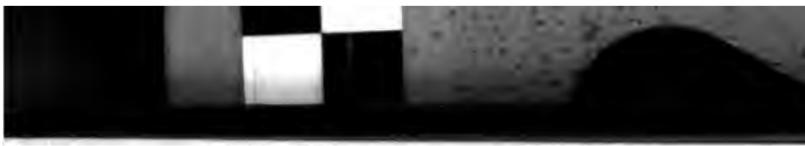
Thus for a moment we stood face to face, the yellow sunlight straggling through the creepers on to his dark head, and warming our clasped hands.

Then suddenly Lord Everill's eyes filled with an eager, passionate light, and before I could realise what was happening, we had parted; but not

before he had bent down and pressed one swift kiss on my lips, and we had betrayed our mutual secret by one whispered word—

'Celia!'

'Charlie!'



CHAPTER IV

LADY CORISANDE

ABOUT three weeks later I found myself launched out into the world, drifting away from the old free life at home, where I had grown up, romping with boys of all ages, and lording it over my little sisters, as well as over my gentle, soft-hearted mother.

When I had actually parted from them all, for I knew not how long a period, I realised how dear they all were to me, and reproached myself for many thoughtless and wilful acts, by which I had been wont to obtain my own way. Well, all that was at an end. There would be but little chance now of my going within several degrees of my own will, for I was on my way to fulfil an engagement as 'companion' to a widow lady of rank, and I knew that the situation was one which would entail no little exercise of patience and self-denial.

I knew but little concerning Lady Corisande de

Mervil, beyond that she was a rich widow of English parentage. She had spent the greater part of her life in Paris, and there married a Monsieur de Mervil, who had died a few years since.

I imagined her as tall and solemn, in widow's weeds, and with a sepulchral voice that was fond of dwelling on things dreary and profound ; and it was with no slight trepidation that I arrived at my new home.

The first impressions were, indeed, reassuring ; and as my eyes drank in the fairness of the Sussex landscape, I began to think that if I were but allowed a little fresh air and exercise daily, I should be able to put up with a certain portion of annoyance and loneliness. In the warm August sunshine the corn-fields shone like polished amber ; honeysuckle and sweet-briar, clustering in the way-side hedges, flung a delicious fragrance through the air. At a little distance I could see that the gorse was in golden and orange bloom on the downs that stretched away in softly swelling undulations towards the great chalk cliffs of the coast.

Brantwood itself was an imposing old building, finely situated amongst grand old trees, above which rose the turrets and gables of the castle ; and as I

drove up to the entrance I felt very nervous, and insignificant in comparison.

The great iron-studded doors closed behind me with a thud that echoed down the long hall in which I stood, a slim, unimportant figure in clinging garments, gazed down upon by the glassy eyes of antlered heads of deer on the wall, and eyed with disdainful superiority by three stately and consequential footmen. All my courage and high spirits forsook me, and I looked round appealingly, devoutly wishing myself at home again.

‘Walk this way, please,’ said one of the servants, whose ample waistcoat and broad, placid countenance imparted to him a certain air of sublimity which was awe-inspiring. And with that he slowly marched down the hall until he reached a red baize door. Here he paused to inquire mysteriously: ‘What name?’ then threw open the door and shouted in stentorian tones—

‘Miss Celior Randorm! ’

The room was so darkened that at first I could distinguish nothing in it. But a rustle of silks in one corner, and a little exclamation of welcome guided me up to whom I supposed to be my mistress.

Then my hand was warmly shaken, and a bright, foreign-sounding voice exclaimed—

‘At last! This is charming, Miss Random. I assure you that I have been on the verge of suicide every day this week from *ennui*, and you are just in time to help to revive my spirits. You must be tired. Are you hungry? I daresay you had a long and dusty journey?’

‘Rather long,’ I answered timidly. ‘Thank you, I am not tired nor hungry; but only a little dusty and—’

‘And shy? Why, you look a perfect baby. And I dare wager you are terrified of me. Dear me—what an idea! Come, let me see you in the light. No doubt you are dying to see me, too, are you not? Expected to see a very old, ill-tempered woman, with crutches and spectacles?’

Laughing and chattering, more to herself than to me, she drew up one of the crimson silk blinds, and turned to scan me from head to foot, looking at the same time as if she expected to overwhelm my country-bred mind with admiration of herself.

Indeed, at the first glance, she did strike me as being a very beautiful woman. She was of middle height, with a graceful figure and tiny hands and

feet; her black hair was elaborately dressed, rising in a pyramid from off the shapely forehead, and curling with artificial regularity on her temples. Her colouring was bright, and rendered doubly so by comparison with her black eyebrows and sparkling dark eyes; and the general effect was of a radiant vivacity that attracted my fancy. Evidently she was not much over thirty, and, judging from her appearance, would not make a very hard or alarming mistress.

‘My dear little Phyllis,’ she cried; ‘with your dark curls and piquante face you are ravishing, I can tell you. And how tall are you? You are a regular maypole—just two inches above the correct height for a woman. Never mind—your figure will improve as you grow older. I like your looks, and I think we shall be good friends by and by. But you must always be merry and gay, or I shall be in a dreadful bad temper—oh, dreadful, I can assure you. It is so dull, so dull here in the country, with no neighbours, except the dreariest of old bores, that existence becomes a misery—a despair. All you have to do is to amuse me, and to look after my precious *Bijou* and *Mignon*. Are they not angelic?’

‘Yes, indeed. I am fond of dogs,’ I answered. Nevertheless, my heart did not go out towards the angelic Bijou and Mignon, as I glanced at the two pampered lap-dogs that were snoring in the most luxurious chairs in the room.

‘I am afraid,’ I faltered, ‘that you will find me very—very unamusing. I have never been anywhere, nor seen anything, and I am very ignorant.’

‘Yes; you are younger than I should have wished,’ she said, flinging herself back into her chair and yawning; ‘but you look as if you had plenty of *esprit*, in spite of your little shepherdess air. Remember, I am very capricious; and I have quarrelled with three lady-companions already. Now I will ring, and tell my maid, Justine, to take you to your room.’

It did not take me many days to discover that Lady Corisande was, as she had told me, very capricious; and not only capricious, but decidedly eccentric as well. Her chief characteristic (and in justice I may add she had no worse fault) was an excessive vanity and love of admiration. It gave me quite a shock when I went to her room one morning before she had completed her elaborate

toilette, to find her with half the beautiful bloom of her cheeks vanished, and her eyes a little less dark and brilliant than usual. She was really so handsome that she required no artificial aid, which is, to my mind, neither correct nor becoming. I felt myself blush with shame for her, and wondered what my mother would have said had she known that I was living with what she would have called 'a be-painted French hussy,' who, alas! spoilt herself by cosmetics, tight lacing, and dangerously high heels.

However, apart from this, Lady Corisande was, at heart, a far better woman than many I have known; for she was generous to the last degree, ready to make the best of everything, and of a warm, impulsive nature.

She was very good to me, and my life was happier than I could have believed it possible when I separated from my mother and the children, and when I was no longer queen over all I surveyed, as I had been in our little world at home.

Yet it happened that nowadays my thoughts did not always fly straight back home, as they would once have done. On the contrary, I often transported myself to a certain dingy little room

in a London street, crumpling dusty leaves between my fingers, and listening to a certain eager voice that rang only too often in my ears. Generally, when I arrived at this stage of my reminiscences, I would feel Lady Corisande's keen eyes fixed on me, and she would cry laughingly—

‘Ah, Celia! Of whom are you dreaming, *mignonnes*? ’ And like a baby I would blush and stammer out—

‘Of nobody—nobody. Indeed, it is nobody.’

But I am afraid she detected my little falsehood, for she used to laugh gaily, saying she understood what I meant, and that ‘nobody is sometimes the most interesting person in the world.’

Then, glad of an excuse to mount her favourite hobby, she would entertain me with stories of her own successes in Paris, where, to judge from her own account, she had had all the world at her feet.

Evidently her marriage with Monsieur de Mervil had been one of those loveless matches arranged by the parents of both parties, which, to my unsophisticated mind, seemed so cruel and miserable and unromantic; and it was equally evident that Lady Corisande did not consider that the tie had been strong enough to warrant a very long widowhood.

She informed me, in the most candid manner, that she had every intention of again assuming the bonds of matrimony, probably even within a few months.

One day I ventured to express my surprise that she had not done this sooner, since she had had so many suitors; and then without hesitation she confided to me her most private hopes.

‘My sweet innocence !’ she exclaimed carelessly; ‘I suppose you think these little matters should be hidden in the inmost recesses of the heart, do you not? Well, you are young; and I,’ with a sigh, ‘thought so too when I was your age. However, I am now sensible enough to see that where the heart can go with the head, one may be sure that all is safe; whereas, if the heart goes one way and the head another, you must be cautious, for if you yield to sentiment or tender feeling you are doomed to unhappiness.’

‘Oh, surely,’ I interposed, ‘that is very selfish, madame?’

With her craze for appearing to be as French as possible, it was one of her fancies that I should always address her as madame, instead of by her long and ceremonious English title.

‘Not that, but discreet. However, I have

done the best thing possible, and combined the two. My heart has gone forth,' she went on, rather sentimentally, 'to one who is in all respects worthy to be loved for himself. He is young, charming, noble; and it is for his sake that I have treated my other admirers with coldness. Does it make my love any the less warm that this young man is also the one with whom, in a worldly sense, it is most desirable that I should unite? For him, it is, indeed, the most advantageous thing in the world; and, therefore, I have not the slightest doubt that in a very short time all will be arranged. He is coming here in a week or two, and you shall tell me what you think of him.'

'Did you say he was young, madame?'

'Not quite twenty-two. That is nothing,' she said, a little sharply, 'for I am a young woman for my age, and it is only in England that you think of such trifles. I can assure you, *petite*, that before my—before he has been here a week, he will be my slave.'

'I am sure of it,' I assented. 'But, madame, if he should not be worthy of you? If he should be thinking only of his own interests?'

'He is honour itself,' she exclaimed, with real

feeling. 'When you see him, you will know how impossible it is to suspect ill of him. He is beautiful as an Adonis, chivalrous as a Bayard, adorable as an angel. Is he not, my Bijou? Is he not, my Mignon?'

'Ah! how happy she must be,' I thought, with a little envious sigh. 'She has roses with all the thorns plucked off.'

CHAPTER V

‘OH, CHARLIE IS MY DARLING’

MONOTONOUS though Lady Corisande considered her mode of existence at Brantwood, to me it seemed quite gay compared with that to which I was accustomed. We sometimes attended garden-parties, joined picnics, or went to entertainments in the nearest town. Now and then we received visitors at Brantwood, where Lady Corisande made the most charming of hostesses. But she soon tired of this kind of existence, professed to be rapidly dying of *ennui*, and, to cheer her spirits, decided on having a party of friends to stay in the house.

The party was a small one, consisting of a Comte d'Estrées, a gay married woman called Mrs. Finch, a young officer named Collier, and last, but not least, her lover, with perhaps his mother and two sisters. She would not tell me the name of this paragon—this Adonis, this

Bayard, this angel,—though she spoke so constantly of him and his virtues that, simply from weariness of hearing his praises rung so often, I began rather to dislike him than otherwise.

Knowing Lady Corisande's unfortunate propensity for imagining that every man she met fell in love with her at first sight, I could not help fearing a little lest her hero should disappoint her. A boy of twenty-one does not usually care to have a wife ten years older than himself, and Lady Corisande's affection for him seemed so genuine that I dreaded the shock it would be to her feelings if he did not fully reciprocate it.

The Comte d'Estrées arrived two days before the rest of the guests. He was a dapper little Frenchman, with well-twisted moustachios, and a most irreproachable air of gallantry, both in his faultless apparel and elegant manners. I should have liked to send him for a good tramp after partridges, with Dick and Fred, over stiff turnips, and with rough hedges and fences to scramble over!

However, Lady Corisande appeared to find his society excessively pleasant; and if it had not been for what she told me, I should have imagined *this* to be the 'adorable angel.'

Sometimes I felt rather *de trop* in those days, and longed for the arrival of the rest of the visitors, hoping that the English element might be more natural and sympathetic to me than was the French one. Yet I should be ungrateful if I did not add that d'Estrées was really a very good and kind little man, who did not think his fine manners wasted even on an insignificant little 'companion' like myself.

'Mademoiselle Celia laughs of me,' he said one day good-temperedly. 'I am not as the English young men.'

'Celia should go to Paris and see the world,' remarked madame; 'she wants *chic*.'

'Pardon! It would be to paint the lily,' he replied, with one of his queer little bows. 'Mademoiselle Celia suits her *rôle*—simplicity.'

Left now a good deal alone, with nothing to do but attend to the comfort of the snoring Bijou and the snarling Mignon, I began to feel miserably home-sick and heart-sick, and longed to confide my hopeless secret to some sympathetic friend. I had sometimes wondered what it would be like to be what is called 'in love'; but I had never imagined that I could so quickly yield up my heart to any

stranger as I had done to Lord Everril. My feeling for him was not merely the dazzle and glamour and excitement of a girl's first passing fancy, but an all-enduring affection, such as none can experience twice in a lifetime. I was quite sensible of the folly of it all; it was more than probable that I should never see him again; and, besides, I knew, after what he had told me about his cousin, that it was best for him to forget me, as, perhaps, he had done already.

I did not like that thought, heroic though it sounded; and I remember one day when it was too much for me, and great tears began to roll down my cheeks in the most doleful way.

I did not hear Lady Corisande coming up behind me, until she laid her hands on my shoulders, and, turning my face up to her own, cried in surprise—

‘What! my merry shepherdess in tears? Celia! Celia! you are thinking again of “nobody”?’

‘O madame, I am very silly!’ I said, trying to laugh through my tears. ‘But—but—’

‘Come, you must not cry; it will give you a red nose. Just see what you look like in the glass. That is not the way to improve your looks whilst

“nobody” is away. He will not know you again, *petite*. Now, I have guessed your secret so far: why will you not tell me the rest?”

‘Because I want to forget it. It can never, never be anything. Oh, it is very unmaidenly of me to be like this! I don’t know what Aunt Rebecca would say if she knew.’

‘So there are difficulties? And you love this “nobody” very much?’

‘Ah!’ I began eagerly; then paused, smiling.

I could not tell her what I felt for Charlie. She could not have understood; and, besides, there are some things one cannot talk about, even to one’s dearest friend.

Fortunately, Monsieur d’Estrées entered the room at this moment, and Lady Corisande at once joined him, whispering to me as she passed—

‘Child, I am in such a flutter! I have just had a letter to say that *he* is coming here to-day—this very afternoon. Feel my pulse, how it beats!’

I said ‘Yes,’ though it appeared to me that her pulse was perfectly calm and steady; and then I took up my work and retired to the front drawing-

room, feeling, somehow, that I was not wanted by the other two.

I must confess that I was eager to see Lady Corisande's hero, and began to share her excitement, when a ring at the door-bell at last announced his arrival.

Even Bijou and Mignon stirred and blinked their drowsy eyes at me, as though roused to a feeble interest in the coming of their future master.

I could hear the servant with the sublime face and portly tread marching up the long corridor; then, with even more than his usual pomposity, he flung wide open the door, and announced—

‘Lord Everril!’

For a moment the room seemed to have turned into a merry-go-round, and my head swam. Then I sprang up with an inarticulate cry, and both my hands were caught in a warm, loving grasp, and Charlie himself looked down into my face—Charlie himself was repeating gladly—

‘Celia! *you* here? Celia?’

This is what met Lady Corisande's view as she came forward to welcome her guest. Her lover

and her 'companion' standing with clasped hands, gazing rapturously into each other's eyes, and oblivious of all else in the world beside, though Bijou and Mignon were snarling and yelping madly at their heels, as if trying to guard their mistress's rights and honour.

There was a moment of ominous silence before Lady Corisande could control herself enough to speak.

'Lord Everil and Miss Random appear to be friends,' she said, in a high, freezing voice. 'Perhaps I am intruding?'

Charlie and I shrank guiltily away from each other. I dared not speak or move, and though Charlie strove to look composed and natural, he failed to look otherwise than awkward and abashed; and as she watched us the anger in Lady Corisande's eyes flashed more and more fiercely.

But, to the relief of us all, at this crisis Monsieur d'Estrées, with a tact that won my everlasting gratitude, came to the rescue, and broke the awkward silence.

'No wonder,' he said, 'that Mademoiselle Celie is glad to meet with an old friend, who can bring

her tidings of her family. No doubt Lord Everril has lately seen some of her relatives.'

'Yes,' said Charlie quietly; 'Miss Rebecca Random is one of my oldest friends.'

Here, indeed, was a pretty kettle of fish!

CHAPTER VI

'COME, LET US KISS AND PART'

I LAY trembling in bed that night.

That Charlie should turn out to be Lady Corisande's 'adorable angel' seemed too strange to be true. But now I understand it all. She was the beautiful cousin of whom he had spoken, and this grand old place, in which I had been living so unsuspectingly, was the home which, by rights, ought to belong to him, and which until the last ten years had been the family seat of the Everrils for centuries.

How dense I must have been not to have guessed it sooner! And now that I had at last learned the truth, what was I to do? Give him up, and let him forget the silly little country lass, who was not half worth the sacrifice of wealth and ease, and of a beautiful home of which she would never make a fit and worthy mistress? Yes! There could be no doubt that that was my duty. I must return home

at once, before matters became more complicated, and before Lady Corisande gave me an ignominious dismissal. If it were for Charlie's good, there was no sacrifice for which I was not ready—even to parting with him for ever, and dying (here two tears rolled down my cheeks and on to my pillow)—and dying of a broken heart in the flower of my youth and beau—

A low, but only too expressive knock at the door checked my disconsolate reflections, making me start and turn cold with apprehension of Lady Corisande's wrath.

'Come in,' I called weakly, scrubbing my cheeks to hide the trace of tears. 'Come in.'

The door slowly opened, and Lady Corisande entered, arrayed in a long dressing-gown of crimson satin, and holding a lighted candle in her hand.

'I wish to speak a few words to you,' she said coldly, walking majestically up to my bedside. 'Are you wide enough awake to attend to what I say?'

'Yes, madame,' I whispered. Then there was a painful silence, whilst I glanced nervously at the handsome figure in its long red robes, and at the brilliant face which, just now, looked so haughty and forbidding.

‘Celia,’ she began at last, ‘why have you deceived me? Why did you not tell me that Lord Everril was the person of whom you have been thinking all this time, when you assured me it was “nobody”?’

‘How could I tell? O madame, believe me! I did not *dream* that it was Char—Lord Everril whom you were expecting.’

‘Yes, you have deceived me,’ she went on bitterly. ‘After all my kindness to you, you have tried to rob me of the affection of one who is far above you. You have tried to come between us—to—to—in short,’ with increasing indignation, ‘to rival *me*—to steal him from *me*. Presumptuous child!’

‘Indeed not!’ I cried with some warmth. ‘You would not tell me his name. I did not try to steal him from any one; and I knew him long before I saw you. And I wish—I wish I had stayed at home, and never come here to be accused of I know not what. Ah! how can you be so unkind?’

I was working myself into an angry excitement. After all, had I not the sweet assurance that *I* was the one he loved—and not this beautiful widow, who looked upon him with such a provoking sense of rightful possession.

‘You must go from here,’ she said, pacing up and down in front of my bed. ‘You cannot stay here; that is certain. But, as I do not see how you can leave me at a moment’s notice, like this, for the next few days whilst you are here you must promise to avoid him and to keep in your own place. If he desires to see you, you must have the *migraine*, and stay in your room. You must not meet under any circumstances.’

‘I understand, madame,’ I murmured. ‘I will obey you.’

‘You are young and foolish and romantic. But I forgive you. Only you must give up your silly little dream; it is an utter impossibility for both of you. He can never,’ she added scornfully, ‘have thought seriously of you; you are a mere baby. I am distressed to have to say it, but I am disappointed in you, Celia. Come! Do not cry. Such nonsense is not worth the trouble of tears.’

With that she rose, patted my head, as much as to say that I was a baby incapable of understanding anything but a rattle, and sailed slowly out of the room; victorious, alas! over the poor, insignificant little maid who lay in bed, weeping her eyes out till the morning broke.

I remained in my room all the following day. In the morning Lady Corisande paid me a short and not very amiable visit, leaving me a little more miserable than she had found me.

This time she tried persuasion instead of reproach. She represented to me how much misery Lord Everril's marriage with me would entail, and how injurious it would be to him in every respect. I was helpless in such hands, and believed her implicitly. I was not versed in the ways of the world, nor had I learned how literally true it is that *noblesse oblige*.

As Lady Corisande went on piling up the agony, convincing me of what vital importance it was that Lord Everril should 'marry money,' and keep up the old name in its former glory, I began to marvel at my own overweening presumption.

'But,' I ventured to suggest timidly, 'why should he keep up the name, madame, against his will? What does it mean—*to keep up a name*? He will always be an Everril, and if he wishes to cover the name with glory will poverty prevent him? Is it not industry and perseverance that bring men fame and honour?'

'Little simpleton! Do you think the future

Everrils, living on an income of less than £1000 a year, will count as *anybodies*? No! They will disappear as though they had never existed, and be heard of no more. And why? Because of a ridiculous, boyish whim, and because a vain child aspires to wear a coronet, forsooth! although she brings ruin and misfortune on a whole family by her obstinacy.'

'It is not that!' I cried, almost dancing with rage, whilst Bijou and Mignon rushed at me, yelping discordantly, and pecking viciously at my skirts. 'I would not wear a coronet if you were to offer me one this minute. If any one is like that, and is *vulgar*, it is the Everrils and Derings themselves, with their *vulgar* pride of money, and old names, and *noblesse oblige*, and all that. If *that* is a sign of glory,' with withering contempt, 'and of good birth, then I am *proud* to be a nobody.'

When I paused, out of breath, looking, I am sure, very unheroic, with my tumbled hair, flushed cheeks, and features of childish wrath, I fully expected Madame to bring down the house over my head, or otherwise to annihilate me for my temerity.

But to my surprise she said nothing; merely rose

with great dignity, and left me, without another word or glance.

This was the day on which Charlie's mother was to arrive at Brantwood with her daughters, Lady Jane and Lady Blanche. About four o'clock that afternoon I watched the carriage drive up to the front door, heard gay voices and laughter, and presently saw the happy party strolling about the lawn and shrubberies. And then I sat down and cried disconsolately, because they all seemed to get on so *very* well without me.

I began to tire dreadfully of my imprisonment. My thoughts grew sentimental and morbid, and I examined myself in the looking-glass, in melancholy hopes of finding the hectic spot on each cheek that is said to betoken an early death of consumption. Alas! I was still plump and healthy, with no apparent physical change, except that my eyes were dull and my eyelids red; and somehow that did not help to make me look interesting.

Nevertheless I was sincerely miserable; and I was beginning to feel almost tragic, when there came a knock at the door, and Madame again entered.

She looked more like her usual self, and actually

stroked me on the cheeks, calling me her 'poor, sad little shepherdess.'

But the torture was not yet over; and this time it was all the harder to bear because it came in a form there was no resisting, just from its plausible gentleness.

My girlish innocence was but a poor weapon to use against the *finesse* of Lady Corisande's diplomacy, and my submission was a mere matter of time and patience and skilful argument.

She told me how she and all his relations and friends loved Charlie as surely no young man ever had the fortune—or misfortune—of being loved before. How they trusted to him to redeem his family, and to be the world's gay favourite in all things. How it had been almost as good as settled that she and Charlie should marry each other. And how Lady Everril and the whole noble race of Derings had put on sackcloth and ashes and were reduced to despair, simply through the coming of an insignificant little companion—a child who had no 'name to keep up,' and nothing to call her own save, perhaps, a pretty face and a pair of bright eyes.

'After knowing all this,' Lady Corisande con-

cluded, 'will you still persist in being the apple of discord amongst us, Celia?'

'No—I will not,' I replied, adding half under my breath, 'for you have cut me in two, between you all.'

'You will mend. You are young, and this is but a child's fancy. I can trust you, cannot I, Celia?'

'Trust me?' I cried. 'Only try.'

'That is my wise shepherdess again. Good night. Take a run in the garden whilst we are at dinner. No one is about. It will bring back your roses, and you will soon be as gay as ever, and as happy.'

'No, not happy,' I thought sadly. 'Never so happy again. O mother, why did you ever send me from you?'

Then a sudden impulse made me seize Lady Corisande's hand as she was leaving the room, and exclaim wistfully—

'O madame, only tell me this. Does *he* have nothing to say in the matter? Is he ready to obey others, even in this?'

'*Noblesse oblige*,' she said coldly, and so left me. The fresh evening air restored my spirits a little, as I ran in and out of the shrubberies, gloveless

and hatless, that the soft breeze might cool my forehead and swollen eyelids.

There is something about the soft, misty summer gloaming that makes it seem, so I always think, to belong especially to lovers.

The silence ; the quiet, shadowy twilight stealing like sweet sleep over the land ; the distant tinkle of sheep-bells and the lowing of cattle as they are driven home through the meadows ; the gentle sough of dying breezes in the high tree-tops—all this is dedicated to lovers' vows and heart flutterings. At least so it seems to me. For, though I am an old woman now, whenever the long summer evenings come again, my thoughts rush back to that twilight hour in the garden, when my heart was bursting with love, and calling out for Charlie to be at my side—here, where there was no one to disturb our quiet but the cooing wood-pigeons, and now and then a rabbit that rushed away at the sound of a footstep.

When I came in again and ran stealthily up to my room, I found a tempting little supper laid out for me, and, neatly folded up in a napkin, my first and my last *billet-doux* !

How I blushed and trembled as, with eager

ridiculous—so
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folk who take
nowadays are n
were in the goo

‘Sweetest he~~s~~
that my love w
marry with the c
without it. Let
you are true to
dear face and eyes.

‘P.S. If I can't
I will see myself hu

How I kissed the
raying for ——

wished me to give him up to her, had won the day.

It seemed hard and cruel to leave his note unanswered. What could I say? Should I be brave, and put an end to our little love-story with a few cold words that would save us the pain and misery of meeting only to part for ever?

‘It is for his sake,’ I kept whispering to myself; and then I hastily wrote a little answer to his letter, heedless that it was all blotched and slurred by my tears.

When the maid came to take away my supper she lingered a moment.

‘Can I take an answer to the note?’ she asked presently. ‘It won’t go no further than me, miss.’

‘It is no secret,’ I said, as haughtily as I could.

‘Yes, you may take this note; and say that it is the *last*, and that I will receive no others.’

With that, I carelessly gave her a folded slip of paper that held my deathblow, as I told myself tragically, and which might, just at first, make Charlie, too, sorry that we had ever met.

It ran thus—

‘DEAR LORD EVERBIL,—It is best that we should not meet again. As we were foolish in the past, let

us be wise in the future. Allow me to wish you and Lady Corisande every happiness.

‘I don’t mind a bit, Charlie, if *you* are happy.

‘CELLA RANDOM.’

What a grand commencement! But what a lame, very lame conclusion!

CHAPTER VII

‘UNCERTAIN, COY, AND HARD TO PLEASE’

MEANTIME, I did not intend to be kept much longer a prisoner at the will of my capricious mistress ; and the next day I told Lady Corisande that, if she had not already done so, I must write to my mother telling her to expect me home at the earliest opportunity. Madame made no objection. In fact I felt that she was longing to be rid of me ; but her manner to me was certainly kinder than it had been since Lord Everril’s arrival ; and as a proof of her restored goodwill and trust she gave me permission to walk in the woods whenever I pleased.

‘You will find it pleasant and quiet there,’ she added ; ‘and it is not likely that you will be annoyed by meeting us.’

It was on the tip of my tongue to observe that the annoyance would not be on my side, but fearing to forfeit this slight return to liberty, I

refrained, and only expressed my gratitude for her kindness.

Glad of anything to relieve the monotony of my dull and solitary days, I availed myself of her offer; and running through the garden, presently found myself in the cool shade of the woods, and free—as I understood from Lady Corisande's words—from any fear of meeting him whom I most longed, yet most dreaded to see.

The sun, glinting through rifts in the thick foliage, flecked the mossy carpet under my feet with dancing yellow lights; birds were chirruping in the trees, with a peculiar succulent sound that made the whole wood seem to resound with the soft kisses of children; and in the distance I could hear laughter and chattering from the labourers in the fields, as they turned the sweetly smelling hay.

I alone was desolate and solitary. It was little use trying to persuade myself that I must be sensible and strong-minded; for to tell the truth, I was as thoroughly miserable as I could be. I dare say, any one who hears this little story from my own lips will imagine that my feelings for Charlie were neither very deep nor very strong. I have no words to explain what I felt for him; it was too

firmly fixed in my heart to bear probing into ; and even in those days, when it was all passionately fresh and vivid, to outward appearance I was self-contained and undemonstrative.

I can only say that I loved him. Sometimes I took a half-melancholy pleasure in comparing our misfortunes with those of Romeo and the fair Capulet, and then I would repeat to myself those tender words of sixteen-year-old Juliet—

‘ My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep ; the more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite.’

I was thinking somewhat in this strain, when I heard the patter of feet behind me, and a breathless voice calling my name. My first instinct was to hide, knowing how dire would be Madame’s wrath should she discover that I had spoken to Lord Everril, when a nearer call assured me that it was not Charlie but M. d’Estrées who was following me.

This gallant and exquisitely dressed little Frenchman always gave me the impression that he could not run, even to save his life. He was like a Dresden china figure, more for ornament than for use ; and now that he was exerting himself to such unusual effort, his appearance, when he approached

me, was bordering on the ludicrous. His necktie was awry, he was panting for breath, and his greeting bow had lost its customary grace.

‘Ah! I thought so,’ he panted. ‘When I saw a —fairy—form—flit—past, I said: “*Voilà!* there goes the victim.”’

‘Victim!’ I answered bitterly. ‘Say rather the apple of discord and dissension, as Madame has it.’

‘Victim all the same,’ he replied. ‘Victim to the caprice of an eccentric *grande dame*. You are much to be pitied for that, it seems to me. Tell me, my pretty Celie, art thou very sad?’

‘No, indeed, monsieur,’ I returned proudly. ‘I begin not to care at all, and to see that I have been much mistaken in the goodness and generosity of the *noblesse*.’

‘Then you love not this *beau garçon*—this brave young man who is like an Apollo, and who is, of all things, the most charming?’

He was a curious little creature, this French exquisite, with his curled moustachios, sparkling dark eyes, and quaintly turned phrases. I hardly knew whether or not to resent his questions, and answered in a scarcely audible voice—

‘No, monsieur.’

‘That is a pity. For do you not know that he is in despair for you, and ready to commit any foolishness for your sake.’

In spite of a certain affectation of manner, the Comte was one of the most kind-hearted men in the world, and I read in his face such unfeigned sympathy and desire to comfort me, that my pride was disarmed, and I cried pathetically—

‘And I, monsieur, would do *anything* for him. Ah, that is what makes me so miserable !’

‘Now I begin to see. You say to yourself, “Here am I, without rank, without fortune—it is not for his good to love me. And there is his cousin, who is rich and beautiful; if he marries her he wins back his estate, his moneys. Therefore, I will be a willing victim and resign him—for true love’s sake.” Have I not reason, mademoiselle? You need not fear me. I am come to give you all my help.’

‘Oh, you are too kind,’ I cried, touched by these first words of pity or sympathy that I had received. ‘Every one but you says I am in the wrong. What can I do? It is not to be expected that Madame should give him up! And I would *rather*, I would indeed, let him think that I do not much mind, so

that he may marry her and forget me, and be happy. Then all would come right.'

'For him—yes. The truth is,' and here M. d'Estrées lowered his voice confidentially, 'the adorable Corisande is, not alone capricious, but also eccentric. The one dream of her life is—matrimony! She is not now so young as she was; and clever and beautiful though she is, it is not every one who would have the courage to take her for his wife. And so it is that only one or two insignificant—what is it you call them?—*nobodies*, have wished to marry with her. But she is haughty; they are not good enough for her. There is only this young lord who seems to her suitable; and conceive, mademoiselle, what she must feel when you, with your *beaux yeux*, come and steal his heart from her. It must be hard, that.'

'If only she truly cared for him, I could bear it better,' I said. 'O monsieur, is there no hope for me?'

'One,' he said, taking hold of one of my hands. 'Only one.'

'Is there one? Oh! what is it? Tell me—is it anything that I can do—that I can say?'

'Parfaitement. You have but to be docile—to

be what you always are, mademoiselle. It is—you will not be angry ?'

'No, no ! Tell me. There is nothing I will not do.'

'It is to allow me *to make my love to you*,' said the Comte, with a low bow, and an expressive glance from his dark eyes, as he raised my hand gently to his lips.

'Ah, monsieur ! How can you be so unkind—so cruel ?'

I snatched my hand from him indignantly. Was he laughing at me, and amusing himself at the expense of my innocence and grief ? Or did he really mean what he had said ? It was impossible that he could be serious. He had only raised my hopes to dash them to the ground with cruel mockery and insult. My heart was bursting with anger and misery ; and I was turning away, almost crying with disappointment and outraged feelings, when he detained me by laying a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

'Come, come, mademoiselle,' he said kindly ; 'you misunderstand me. As I have said, you have but to be docile. It is only a little ruse of which I have been thinking. It is for your good, and also for mine.

‘But I do not see how,’ I cried, more and more puzzled. ‘What good *can* it do?’

‘Listen. First, there is Madame, who is above all things—jealous.’

‘Yes; indeed she is.’

‘Second, there is you, the victim, who loves this young nobleman.’

‘Yes. But what of all that, monsieur?’

‘And last, there is me, who loves the adorable Corisande!’

Having said this he drew himself upright, and touched his heart with his hand, with an old-fashioned, sentimental air of gallantry that at any other time would have moved me to laughter.

But now I was so overcome by surprise that words failed me, and I stared at him in wondering silence as he stood before me in that heroic attitude, and with such genuine emotion in his face.

‘Do not mistake me,’ he went on presently, ‘when I find in her faults. With me, love is not blind; and when I say that she is capricious, jealous, eccentric, it means, not that I care for her the less because of these little faults. On the contrary, they are ravishing in my eyes.’

‘Hark! I interrupted. ‘Some one comes.’

‘And I have your promise,’ he went on, heedless of my caution and raising his voice. ‘Mademoiselle, how happy you have made me. My affection——’

‘Oh, please don’t!’ I whispered eagerly. ‘It is she; it is Madame herself.’

I seemed fated to be thrust in Lady Corisande’s path; already she was close beside us, and could not have failed to overhear M. d’Estrées’ last remarks.

‘Monsieur seems to be amusing himself,’ she said, in clear, cold tones; ‘I have been wondering what had become of him. Ah, Celia? So it is you, is it?’

‘It is an Arcadia here in the wood,’ M. d’Estrées hastened to answer. ‘It is a place to live in for ever.’

‘With Celia as Arcadian shepherdess,’ she replied, with a sarcastic laugh. ‘Sweet simplicity in the woodlands.’

‘Exactly. How the idea is appropriate! Sweet simplicity!’

‘Perhaps you would prefer to remain here and finish your idyl? Or are you disposed to join us in the garden, where we are regaling ourselves with fruit and cream?’ said Madame, in a way that

admitted of but one answer. '*Au revoir*, Celia. Do not lose yourself in these woods.'

M. d'Estrées kissed the tips of his fingers to me, and, to my dismay, bent on me a look of such exaggerated admiration that I blushed for shame as Madame's eyebrows rose contemptuously. As she left me she gave me a glance she might have thrown to her waiting-maid had the latter ventured to thwart her will; and I could not feel that M. d'Estrées' well-meant intrigue had done more than precipitate me yet further in my slough of despond.

I watched the two figures strolling down the green pathway, where the branches made a fairy bower over their heads; and when they were out of sight I sank on the mossy carpet and burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Here was a strange state of affairs! And not the least strange part of it was M. d'Estrées' love for Lady Corisande, and his very original method of showing it.

It was finally arranged that I should leave Brantwood on Monday (it being now Thursday), and it may be imagined how eagerly I longed once more to be at home, where I could pour out my sorrows

to my mother's sympathetic ears, and be petted and soothed and comforted in her loving arms.

The life that I was leading was irksome in the extreme ; even the woods had their limits, and in a day or two I had thoroughly explored them. I began to feel like a caged animal. What right had Madame to treat me thus ? Why should I give up my love to please her ? Why should I not come boldly forward and bid Charlie choose between us ?

Ah ! why not ? I loved him ; and that is why I tried to learn the bitter lesson of self-renunciation for his sake.

Now and then, when I was wandering through the woods, M. d'Estrées contrived to meet me, and raised my spirits a little by his kindness and his quaint mannerisms. And when we were together it invariably happened, much to my annoyance, that we were discovered by Lady Corisande ; and then her lips would tighten, and her whole demeanour express disapproval of my want of propriety and apparent coquetry—as if I, alas ! could help it.

And once—ah, how well I recollect the wild joy, mingled with pain, of that meeting !—as I was

walking round a turn in the pathway, with my head bent in maiden meditation, whom should I meet but Charlie, of whom I had been dreaming, and for whom I had been longing so earnestly.

Fate certainly did not aid me to keep my resolution of self-sacrifice.

Before I could say a word, he had seized my hand and kissed it.

‘At last!’ he exclaimed. ‘I have found you, my faithless little Amaryllis.’

‘Oh, but you must go from me,’ I said hurriedly, turning my face away that he should not read in it my joy at once more hearing his voice. ‘Please leave me at once.’

‘Not I. Do you think it is likely?’ he said gaily; ‘or are you still cruel? I never believed you could be so hard-hearted, Celia. That unkind little note ought to have burned your fingers as you wrote it. Am I to believe that you were in earnest, and really meant to give me up? I will not believe it.’

‘It is best so,’ I replied, struggling hard not to break down, and crying over and over to myself, ‘Be brave, *for his sake*.’ ‘You have no right to come after me when I begged you to leave me in peace.’

‘No right? Why, Celia, what does it all mean? Am I to go away, and believe that you never cared for me after all—I, who love you with my whole heart and soul?’

‘It is best so,’ I repeated drearily. ‘It is best for both of us.’

‘If it is your wish, I can have nothing else to say,’ he answered, drawing himself up stiffly and speaking very coldly. ‘No doubt, as Lady Corisande says, it is your pleasure to exchange a penniless Englishman for a rich French—fool. It is not for me to argue with you on such a subject.’

‘You are right,’ I returned, equally coldly. ‘On such a subject, as you say, I may have the privilege of making up my own mind.’

He was white with suppressed passion. It was only by keeping my own eyes bent on the ground that I could prevent his gaze from tearing my secret from me.

‘Then I am to give it up?’ he said, below his breath. ‘Is it all over between you and me, Celia?’

I looked helplessly away from him, up into the dark tree-tops, praying for courage. ‘For his sake,’ sighed the wind, ‘for his sake. Let your love be infinite.’

‘Yes,’ I said quietly; ‘it is all over now.’

‘Good,’ he said gravely, turning on his heel.
‘Let it be so.’

Yes, it was all over; the die was cast; and as I wandered home, tired and broken-spirited, I prayed that I might have acted for his good. And I wept until my eyes were heavy and red for the love which I had thrust from me with my own hand, to humour the caprice of Lady Corisande and to save the house of Everil from an untimely and lamentable ruin.

The next morning, just as I was writing my last letter to my mother, Lady Corisande’s maid came to me, and asked me to come at once to her mistress.

‘Madame is seriously indisposed,’ she said. ‘She is suffering from a *migraine*, and is unmanageable. She will not eat, yet she desires breakfast. She knows not what she wants, and yet she rings for me every other minute, and is as cross as thunder.’

‘Did she send for me?’ I asked.

‘No, mademoiselle. But last time Madame was ill she liked to have you with her, and said you

soothed her nerves. So if you would be so kind, mademoiselle. I am sure *I* can do nothing with her.'

I was scarcely in the humour to soothe Madame's nerves, but I followed Justine to her room, feeling a faint satisfaction in the thought that perhaps I should be enabled to heap coals of fire on the head of my pitiless adversary.

Lady Corisande's room was darkened, that the light should not hurt her eyes, and she did not hear me enter, or take any notice when I quietly took up my position in an armchair at the foot of the bed, ready to attend to the sufferer should she mention a desire for anything.

Madame's *migraine* was generally a sign that she was ill-tempered or disappointed about something. But to-day she really appeared to be suffering physically as well as mentally, for every now and then I could catch a deep-drawn sigh, and a murmur of—

'Ah, my poor head! Who is there that cares how I feel?'

Did, then, this strange woman, who could be so charming and lovable, and yet at the same time so selfish and despotic, sometimes crave for a love

and sympathy that were not hers, as other women crave? Perhaps M. d'Estrées' estimate of her character was a true one, and she was more to be pitied for her capricious temperament, than disliked for her unreasonable follies. At all events I tried to think so; and told myself that under the tenderness and goodness of her future husband her character would soften and develop until she was worthy to be loved even by him.

'Ah! well,' I heard her mutter; 'I am getting to be an old woman now, and a fool. Bah! how ridiculous it is, to be sure!'

Then she lay back exhausted, complaining now and again of the pain in her head, and of her loneliness and uselessness. When she became quieter, I rose gently, and steeping a handkerchief in eau de cologne bathed her hot forehead, and gently fanned it, hoping that its soothing effect would send her to sleep. For some time she did not move or speak; then she opened her eyes and inquired languidly—

'Is it you, Justine?'

'It is Celia, dear madame. Are you feeling better?'

'A little. But my head is still heavy. How

gentle your touch is, child! Do you add sick-nursing to your other charms?’

‘If my mother is ill, or Aunt Rebecca, it is I who nurse them. But it is mother who has taught me how to do it. If any of us are in pain, it is always she who takes care of us, and comforts us.’

‘Happy child, to be so loved! I have no one—no one.’

‘Oh yes, madame; you have so many. It is only your head that makes you feel sad. Every one is fond of you; you do not need to be told that.’

‘Yes—they were—until *you* came!’ she cried vehemently. ‘And you have stolen two hearts from me already.’

‘I have not,’ I said quickly. ‘It is unfair to say so.’

‘You cannot deny it. First there was Lord Everril; and now there is M. d’Estrées. It is preposterous! And yet you can come and talk to me as if you were innocent. Impertinent!’

‘It is not true,’ I exclaimed hotly, all the pent-up resentment of the last few days surging up within me. ‘And if it were true—what of it?’

Do you want everything? Do you grudge me the smallest crumb of comfort? What can you want with M. d'Estrées, when you have—Charlie?' Then I paused, aghast at my audacity. As for Lady Corisande, I really believe she thought a thunder-bolt had fallen, to judge from her expression of intense amazement.

I have since learned from experience that with domineering natures it is by no means always a soft answer that turneth away wrath; but that, on the contrary, a spirited rejoinder will often have the effect of scattering their pride and anger like chaff before a strong wind.

But in those days I had not discovered this peculiarity, and the least that I expected was to be turned out of the house then and there, and left to find my way home as best I could.

For fully five minutes Lady Corisande was silent, her eyes searching my face intently.

Then she said, quite meekly—

‘Forgive me, Celia; I was unjust. But, after all, you must allow that my suspicions are not entirely unprovoked. You certainly did—*try*—to win Charlie's affections; that is now past and over. But now—though I will not say you are entirely

to blame—is it not a fact that M. d'Estrées is paying marked attentions to you?’

‘No, madame,’ I said, with difficulty concealing my amusement. ‘Far from it.’

‘Yet he is always running after you. When I see you together I cannot help seeing that there is something between you. Is it not so?’

‘Perhaps. Yes, he is very kind to me.’

‘And he talks confidentially to you?’

‘Yes. He has certainly confided things to me.’

‘There! I thought so,’ and her voice trembled. ‘I have known him for years, and yet he never gets beyond bare civilities; and to you, whom he hardly knows, he takes his confidences. Do not be afraid. I am not angry. It is only that you are charming, whilst I am an eccentric old idiot, full of foolish fancies. Old? Ah yes, that is the truth!’

With a sudden impulse I went and knelt by her side, and stroking one of her beautiful white hands, spoke to her just as I should have done to one of the children at home.

‘It is true that he confides in me, madame, and talks to me a great deal. But when he talks it is always of you; what he confides to me are his

hopes that some day you will care for him ; his conversation is of nothing but the “adorable Corisande.” You see that it is you who have all the love, and I that have none.’

‘You are a good girl, Celia,’ she exclaimed. ‘If I have seemed cruel to you, remember that it could not be helped. And, after all, you do not seem to be unhappy ; and recollect that you have many years before you, whereas I am on the brink of old age. No—do not contradict me. Perhaps I shall not see you again before you leave on Monday. In case I do not, here is a little parting gift, as a token of forgiveness on both sides. If it—that is my engagement—is arranged before you go, you must come and wish me joy, as a proof that you bear me no ill-will. Good-bye, Celia. You are a dear, good little thing, and I shall not forget you.’

Then, to my surprise, she put her arms round my neck and embraced me, French fashion, on both cheeks.

I took the little pearl and diamond ring she held out to me, made my farewell as gracefully as I could under the circumstances, and left her, marvelling more than ever at the contradictory

nature which was, in some respects, so forgiving and generous.

To-morrow all would be at an end; and then good-bye to Charlie for evermore, and home again to the boys and my mother, and good old Aunt Rebecca.

CHAPTER VIII

LED TO THE SACRIFICE

It might have been expected that my spirits should regain their old serenity as the time drew near for me to leave Brantwood; and yet, strangely enough, that last Sunday found me more sad and desolate than I had felt on any other day. The life that I was going back to would never be what it had been in the old light-hearted days before I had committed the folly of falling in love with a man who could never be anything more than a formal acquaintance to me. And though I knew in my heart that there was no hope for me, so long as I remained within reach of him I clung, against all reason, to a desperate belief that by some miracle things would be made right for us even yet.

At least I must look on his face once more, if only to see if he were happy; if my sacrifice had been worth making; if he had forgotten me and the love he had once professed for me.

I knew that if Lady Corisande and her friends went to church they must pass under the window of my room ; and long before there was a chance of seeing them I was at my post, waiting to take a stolen glance at Charlie for the last time ; and, I am sorry to say, sometimes finding my sight quite obscured by a blinding mist of tears.

But about eleven o'clock my patience was rewarded. I heard approaching voices and footsteps, and presently the whole party passed under my eyes. First, bearing a huge Bible and prayer-book, and escorted by an old gentleman, came Lady Everril, followed by two tight-laced and decorous young women whom I supposed were her daughters. Next came Madame, with Charlie on one side and M. d'Estrées on the other.

I thought Charlie looked rather cross, but when Lady Corisande turned and whispered something to him, his face brightened, and his whole manner underwent a change from sullen gravity to sudden delight. She nodded, smiled, blushed, as he kissed her hand with irrepressible enthusiasm ; and together they passed on into the sunlight—leaving me, weeping alone in the shadows.

However, it was only what I had expected, and

I managed to control myself into a strained calmness, now that the blow had actually fallen with all its weight.

No doubt I should soon be sent for to pay my respects and make my congratulations, and until that ordeal was over I was determined to show an indomitable courage and fortitude. Time enough after that to break down and give way to the weakness and folly of useless longings and regrets. But, all the same, I thought it was cruel of Lady Corisande to have insisted on that. What benefit would my good wishes bring to her? I should, indeed, as M. d'Estrées had said, be like a victim brought to the sacrifice. Still, there was some faint recompense in the knowledge that I had acted for the best; and when I saw Lady Everril's kind, high-bred face, and the gentle ones of her daughters, I felt glad that I was not the cause of trouble and annoyance to them.

About four o'clock that afternoon Justine brought me a little note that ran as follows—

‘DEAREST CELIA,—All is settled. I am the happiest woman in the world. Will you let by-

gones be bygones, and come to us and wish us joy?

CORISANDE.'

'Tell her I will come,' I said, turning quite cold and faint. 'I will be there in a few minutes.'

The maid paused uneasily, glancing curiously at me.

'Are you ill, mademoiselle?' she asked. 'You are white like snow, and you have saucers round your eyes black as coals. May I fetch you some sal volatile?'

'No, no. It is nothing. It is only that I am sick to death of being pent up here. Where is Lady Corisande?'

'In the garden, mademoiselle. They are all in the arbour. And I am sure,' she added compassionately, 'that company will do mademoiselle good. It is not right for the young to be always alone.'

Slowly I crept downstairs, and as slowly walked down the long, rose-bordered path which led towards the arbour where Lady Corisande awaited me.

I had caught a glimpse of myself in the long mirror at the foot of the staircase, and saw a

white face with drooping lips, and eyes shining out of great dark shadows. I was ashamed to be seen like that, and though I rubbed my cheeks to bring some colour to them, I knew that my appearance would betray my feelings, no matter how firmly I strove to conceal them.

The test was too hard for me; and suddenly I came to a standstill, and flinging my arms up, buried my face in my hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

All the grief and longing of my love seemed to rush over me just then. The future was so dreary, so endless, so hopeless, without him. I could not bear to think that perhaps we should never meet again, and that if we did we should only be Lord Everril and Miss Random to each other; not Charlie and Celia, the boy and girl whose hands and lips had met one golden day in a little room in a London Street, and who had been so radiant, so happy, so hopeful.

‘O Charlie, why did you tell me you loved me, if it was of no use?’ I sighed, as I lifted my doleful face and walked slowly on. ‘If only you had never spoken to me—never made me think that mother and the children were not the whole world to me.’

When I came within sight of the arbour, I saw that Lady Corisande, Charlie, with his mother and sisters, and M. d'Estrées were all there watching for me. As I drew near, Lady Everril rose and planted a solemn, maternal embrace upon her son's cheek—an example which the two girls followed with little pecks of sisterly affection; which sudden demonstration appeared slightly disconcerting and embarrassing to Lord Everril. Then they sailed out of the arbour, each giving Lady Corisande's hand a congratulatory squeeze as she passed; and when I came up, shy and trembling, I found myself alone with Madame and the two gentlemen.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Charlie was intent upon slaughtering some innocent flies that buzzed round his hat; Madame looked agitated, and kept making hasty little dabs at her eyes with a lace pocket-handkerchief. But presently she cleared her throat, raised her head, and began, in a half-hesitating way—

‘I have sent for you, Celia, to—to tell you of my great happiness. I am sure you will—wish me joy—and sympathise with me, and—forgive all that is past.’

‘Yes, dear madame,’ I said dazedly. ‘I wish you all joy, and cannot express to you how—glad——’

I paused, unable to go on. A mist rose before my eyes, through which I saw only Charlie’s face, indistinct and vague. My hands fell to my side, my breath came in little suppressed sobs. Had they no pity? Was not the sacrifice over yet, to which the poor little victim had been brought so helplessly, so forlornly?

‘She does not understand,’ broke in M. d’Estrées’ voice. ‘Poor child! Do you not see how piteous are her eyes? Corisande, you are misleading her. Listen to me, Celie. It is all well now; our adorable Madame has consented to make me the most fortunate of men. And as for you—*voilà!*’

And before I could realise what had happened, Charlie was at my side, holding both my hands, and smiling down at me with a world of love in his blue eyes.

‘Yes, at last,’ he whispered; ‘it has all come right, my brave Amaryllis. You have tried to escape from me, but it was no use: and now you shall *never* leave me, come what may.’

‘O madame!’ I cried; ‘what does it all mean?’

It was easily explained.

A few jealous pangs, caused by M. d'Estrées' little ruse, had shown Madame that, instead of being content with the 'angel' Charlie, she had at last met with her master, and was honestly in love with the good little Frenchman who had wooed her in so novel a fashion.

With a generosity as unreserved as her previous selfishness, she acknowledged that she had acted with lamentable folly and vanity, and begged us to forgive and forget. Further, she hinted that she meant to provide handsomely for Charlie during her lifetime, and to make him heir to all the Everill estates; which—as Charlie afterwards observed ungratefully—was no more nor less than her duty.

'And as for you, Celia,' she ended, 'I must thank you—it was you who showed me my folly. I have seen your note to Charlie, and he told me of your meeting in the wood. Good, loyal child! The best I can wish you,' she added, smiling through her tears, 'is that Charlie will be more amiable to you than he has been lately to the rest of us. He has been unbearably rude and cross and proud. My dear, can you ever forgive me?'

‘Madame, dear madame!’ I cried, almost foolish with happiness. ‘It is too good to be true.’

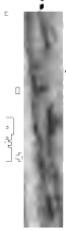
‘Not a bit of it,’ said Charlie, a little defiantly. ‘If I had not had *you*, Celia, I would have had no one. Did you all take me for a fool?’

Which speech contained the last reproach he ever made to Lady Corisande; and, perhaps, on the whole, it was not unmerited.

She had stepped beyond the boundaries of even an eccentric caprice, and the results might have been tragical. As it was, all turned into comedy. Her acknowledgment of her faults and errors was so frank and sincere that it was impossible to bear her ill-will, and we were all willing to let the story die a natural death and be buried in oblivion.

‘All ends in smiles and joyousness,’ said the eloquent M. d’Estrées, as we—two happy pairs of lovers—parted, on the very warmest terms of friendship. ‘My pretty Celia has come to the sacrifice; but it is as a *willing* victim to be sacrificed on the Altar of Hymen.’







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